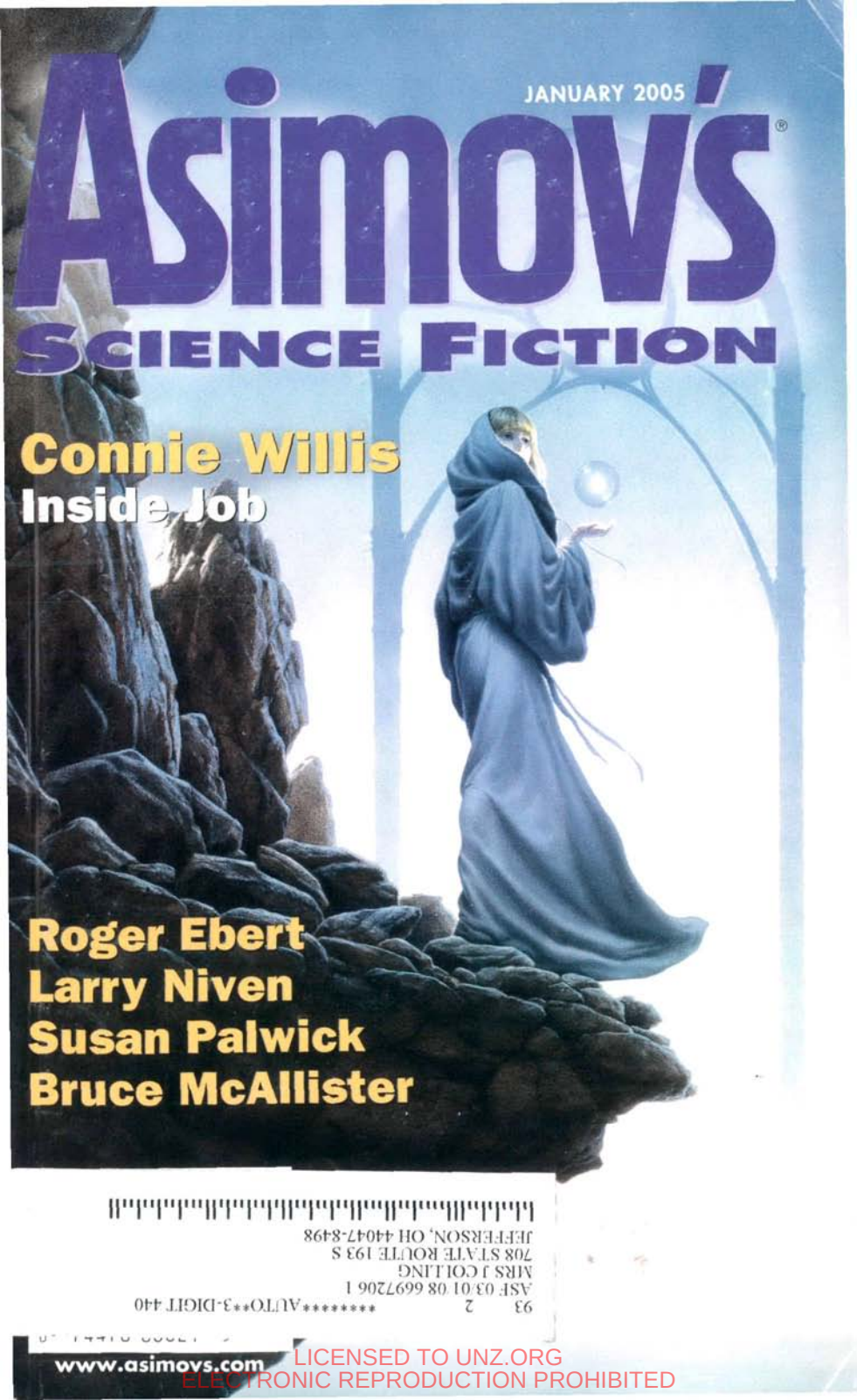

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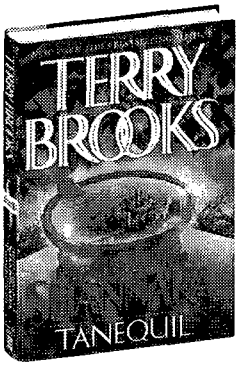

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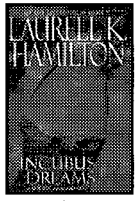

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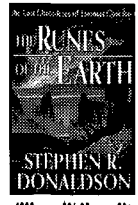

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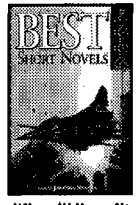

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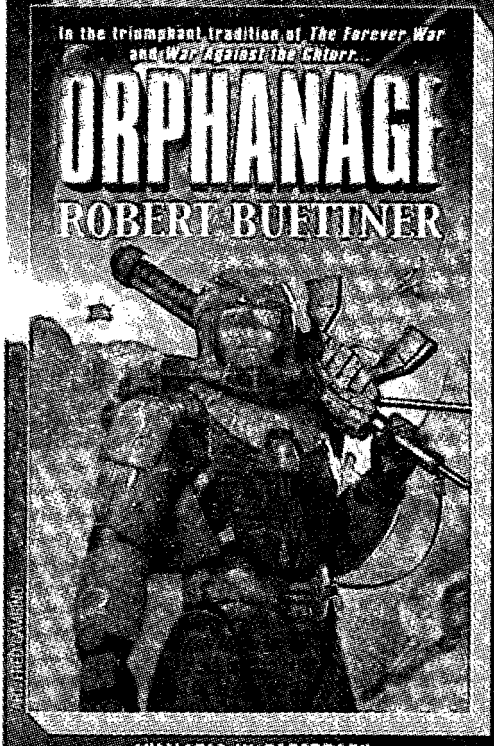

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EDITORIAL

by Sheila Williams

Science fiction may have been my first love. I've always said that my first SF book was *A Princess of Mars* by Edgar Rice Burroughs; that the novel was read to me by my father when I was five. Now that I've stopped to think about that book and other SF works that have influenced me, though, I don't believe that that statement is actually true. My father owned *The Gods of Mars* and *The Warlord of Mars,* two later volumes in the series. As a teenager, he had purchased them from Johnson's Second-Hand Bookstore in Springfield, Massachusetts. Unfortunately, he could no longer find a copy of *A Princess of Mars,* so he told me the story instead. It was a story that was more exciting than any fairy-tale I'd ever heard. I can still remember being captivated by that beautiful and brave princess, Dejah Thoris, I remember being thrilled by John Carter and terrified by the sight of Tars Tarkas in my mind's eye, and, of course, I vividly recall the austere alien vista of Burroughs's dying Barsoom. Perhaps *A Princess of Mars* was not really a science fiction novel—even in 1912 I don't think that there was much science in it—but with that one story (which I hadn't even read), I fell in love with science fiction forever.

I grew up in Holland, Massachusetts, a town that then consisted of roughly four-hundred people three seasons of the year (the population swelled with "summer people" in the warmer weather). I spent the summer outdoors and barefoot. There were no bookstores in the town, and my mother didn't have a driver's license. I read everything that the tiny two-room library had to offer, but the books were all about a hundred years old. My father and my grandfather promised me that there were many books to read, but I had no idea how to get hold of them. Although they didn't name their sources, they told me stories based on the works of Damon Knight, Arthur C. Clarke, Richard Matheson, and Ray Bradbury.

Moving to a suburb of Springfield, Massachusetts, made books of all sorts more accessible—now I could find Robert Heinlein, Madeleine L'Engle, Andre Norton, and Robert Silverberg in the library. My father's membership in the Science Fiction Book Club, however, was my true emancipation. Suddenly I could devour the works of Samuel Delany and Frank Herbert, Harlan Ellison's *Dangerous Visions,* and then *Again Dangerous Visions,* Isaac Asimov's *The Caves of Steel,* Robert Silverberg's *Science Fiction Hall of Fame,* Roger Zelazny, Clifford Simak, Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin, and more and more Heinlein.

One day, Isaac Asimov's Foundation Trilogy arrived. My brother Bobby asked for it first, but I was the faster reader. Every time he put it down, I snuck the book away. My father was furious. Though generally an obedient child, this time I willfully and gleefully dis-

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obeyed his direct order to stop reading the book and let my brother finish it. I was awe-struck by the sweeping story and completely enthralled with the author as well.

Isaac edited *The Hugo Winners Vols. I and II,* and at fifteen, I discovered it through the book club, too. While reading his hilarious introductions to the stories in the book, I made the amazing discovery that there were science fiction magazines. At that moment, I knew that working on an SF magazine had to be the most wonderful job in the world.

My mother was not a fan of science fiction. She had the hard job of raising five children with a husband who was lost in his books. She also had a masters degree in microbiology, which meant that she had read much of Isaac's nonfiction science works. Although her reasons were different, the one thing she shared with my father was a deep respect for the Good Doctor. She didn't really want to encourage my interest in science fiction, and she wasn't certain about my interest in reading in general. She wanted me to enjoy life, to wear makeup and be popular. She wasn't about to discourage my interest in Isaac Asimov, though.

While working on an advanced degree in philosophy in St. Louis, Missouri, I purchased issues of *Asimov's* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* from Paul's Bookstore. One night, my best friend Kristin asked me if I could go anywhere in the world and do anything I wanted what would it be? With a copy of *F&SF* on my lap, I said that I would go to New York City and get a job on a science fiction magazine.

A couple of years later I did exactly that. Since I managed to land a position at *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine,* my parents were equally delighted. I've worked on this magazine for twenty-two years, and, for me, it has truly been the most wonderful job in the world.

I had the extraordinary experience of working with Isaac Asimov for ten years. He was as rational and intrepid, and as warm and funny in person as he was in those introductions to *The Hugo Winners.* (I'll talk more about Isaac in future editorials). I've held every position at the magazine from editorial assistant to executive editor. I've grown in each position, and each job has been a lot of fun. I've worked with terrific editors, including Shawna McCarthy and Gardner Dozois, and have had a number of wonderful assistants. My latest assistant, Brian Bieniowski has been with the magazine for over four years. Brian is witty and smart, and a joy to work with.

My own editorial tastes are not wildly divergent from either Gardner's or Shawna's. I enjoy intelligent, well-written science fiction with strong and believable characters and innovative ideas. I have a preference for hard science fiction, but don't plan to fill the magazine up solely with that sort of story. Isaac, himself, wrote fantasy for *Asimov's* (the then editor made him change his demon into an alien, but Isaac changed it right back for book publication), and the magazine has a heritage of running some very fine fantasies over the years. We've also run a lot of different kinds of science fiction stories in the magazine, and I intend to continue this tradition.

Continued on page 11

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

GARDNER MOVES ON

And so, after nearly twenty years, we have come to the end of Gardner Dozois's splendid career as editor of this magazine. He is stepping down. "It's time to scale back," he says. "I want to go out while I'm still at the top of my game, before editing the magazine becomes a chore rather than a pleasure, and before I become burnt-out and cynical. I'd also like to be able to pursue other projects, including perhaps finding the time to get some of my own writing done." Sheila Williams, who has been executive editor (and, before that, managing editor) of *Asimov's* even longer than Gardner was its editor, will take over the top slot as well, beginning with the January 2005 issue. (The editor is the person who picks the stories you get to read. The executive editor is the one who oversees the daily job of getting the magazines out. My own role here, in case you were wondering, is simply that of a columnist who writes these editorials; I have no story-picking function at all.)

The change is a momentous one, for the man who is giving up his editorial post now was one of the half dozen most influential magazine editors in the annals of science fiction publishing in the United States, and as he steps now into editorial history we can start to put his achievement into proper perspective.

Hugo Gernsback belongs at the head of that select list. *Amazing Stories,* which he founded in 1926, was the first magazine devoted entirely to science fiction; for better or for worse, Gernsback set the whole SF publishing phenomenon in motion, and for a decade was the central figure in the field. Without him none of the rest would have happened.

Then we have John W. Campbell, Jr., editor of *Astounding Science Fiction,* the predecessor of *Asimov's* companion magazine *Analog,* from 1937 to 1971. Whereas Gernsback put more emphasis on the science of science fiction than on the fiction, so that many of the stories he published were dry and dreary exercises in extrapolation, Campbell revolutionized the field by bringing in a host of compelling new storytellers, such writers as Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Theodore Sturgeon, A. E. van Vogt, L. Ron Hubbard, Alfred Bester, and L. Sprague de Camp, while pushing Gernsback-era figures such as Jack Williamson and Clifford D. Simak to higher levels of accomplishment. All through the 1940s and 1950s he was science fiction's dominant editor, for which he was rewarded with eight Hugos—an award named for Gernsback, of course—between 1953 and 1965, a record in his day. (And surely would have won at least a dozen more between 1938 and 1952, if Hugos had existed prior to 1953.)

Campbell's great rival in the 1950s was Horace L. Gold of *Galaxy* —an editor more interested in the craft of writing, and less in philo-

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Editorial Director (1977-199

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sophical ideas, than Campbell. Under his relentless goading science fiction writers reached new heights of narrative skill, and his magazine brought us such classics as Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination,* Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters,* Fritz Leiber's "Coming Attraction," and sections of Sturgeon's *More Than Human* and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451.* During the same period, the urbane and elegant Anthony Boucher founded *Fantasy & Science Fiction* in collaboration with J. Francis McComas, and made it famous for wry, beautifully polished SF and fantasy by writers not usually associated with the field, such as Robert Graves, Raymond Chandler, and Cornell Woolrich. Boucher and Gold each won one Best Editor Hugo. And, finally, Frederik Pohl, himself a major writer of the 1950s and still going strong, founded *Star Science Fiction,* the first all-original paperback anthology, in 1952, featuring a host of stories later to be regarded as classics. Then in the 1960s he replaced Gold as editor of *Galaxy,* bringing us great fiction by Cordwainer Smith, Jack Vance, Larry Niven, Edgar Pangborn, and many more, and collecting three Hugos for his editorial work.

To that stellar group we may now add the name of Gardner Dozois.

Like all the others except Gernsback, Gardner began his career as a writer. His first story appeared in 1966, when he was still in his teens. It brought him a Nebula award nomination. His masterly novella "A Special Kind of Morning" of 1971 established him as a major new voice in science fiction, something that was demonstrated by his winning Nebulas for short stories in consecutive years, 1983 and 1984. There was much other fine work as well. But the price of his craftsmanship was the slow, painstaking pace at which he worked, and that took its economic toll on him; and so after a short period as a free-lance writer he began supplementing his income with editorial work. You will find his name on the masthead of the first issue of *Asimov's,* dated Spring 1977, as associate editor, a post he held during the magazine's earliest days.

Asimov's first editor, a shrewd, amiable Philadelphian named George Scithers, had got the magazine off to a fast start, with Asimov himself as a benign guiding presence in the background, and it grew so quickly in popularity that its publishing frequency increased from quarterly at the outset to bimonthly in 1978 and monthly a year later. Scithers took home two Hugos, in 1978 and 1980, as the top professional editor. Then he resigned after fifty issues and was replaced, briefly, by Kathleen Moloney, who moved over from one of the paperback book publishers. But within a year she, too, had left and her place was taken by the brilliant young Shawna McCarthy, who had been the magazine's managing editor (as the executive editor was known in those days).

The McCarthy regime was brief but distinguished. She published award-winning stories by Connie Willis, Greg Bear, Octavia Butler, Roger Zelazny, and, yes, Robert Silverberg, as well as Gardner's own first Nebula winner, "The Peacemaker." In 1984 she was given the Best Editor Hugo, and seemed to be settling in for a long and important career here; but the following year other fields of endeavor beckoned to

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Analog, October 2003

Best Novelette
"Legions in Time"
Michael Swanwick
Asimov's, April 2003

Best Short Story
"A Study in Emerald"
Neil Gaiman

Best Related Book
The Chesley Awards for Science Fiction and Fantasy Art
John Grant, Elizabeth L. Humphrey, Pamela D. Scoville

Best Dramatic Presentation: Long Form
The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King

Best Dramatic Presentation: Short Form
Gollum's Acceptance Speech at the 2003 MTV Movie Awards

Best Professional Editor
Gardner Dozois

Best Professional Artist
Bob Eggleton

Best Semi-Pro Zine
Locus
Edited by Charles N. Brown, Jennifer A. Hall, Kirsten Gong-Wong

Best Fanzine
Emerald City
Edited by Cheryl Morgan

Best Fan Writer
Dave Langford

Best Fan Artist
Frank Wu

John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer
Jay Lake

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her and she took her leave. The new editor was Gardner Dozois.

The first issue that was entirely Gardner's work was the magazine's one-hundredth number, dated January 1986. During the nineteen years that followed he would win an unprecedented *fourteen* Hugos as Best Editor—a total, you will note, that surpasses that of Campbell, Gold, Pohl, and Boucher combined. I suspect it may never be equaled.

To summarize the Dozois years of *Asimov's* in a paragraph or two is an impossible job. His deep grounding in the history of science fiction imbued him with the desire, which he fulfilled in magnificent fashion, to make *Asimov's* a worthy successor to Campbell's *Astounding,* Gold's *Galaxy,* and Boucher's *Fantasy & Science Fiction.* His ebullient personality put him at the center of a wide group of friends and acquaintances who became major contributors to the magazine. His own considerable talent as a writer gave him the editorial acumen needed to ferret out promising new talent that others might have overlooked. His indefatigable professionalism allowed him to face the staggering job of wading through some eight hundred submissions a month—perhaps ten thousand stories a year, close to two hundred thousand during his whole editorial career, something that could well leave one with a deeply boggled mind.

Out of all that came the magazine you know and cherish, the most honored magazine in science fictional history. He brought you more than two hundred issues glistening with the finest short work, much of it honored by Hugo and Nebula awards itself, of the top writers of our era: James Patrick Kelly, Lucius Shepard, William Gibson (who inaugurated the Dozois regime with a three-part serial, *Count Zero,* in his first issue), Pat Cadigan, Michael Swanwick, Greg Egan, Stephen Baxter, Gregory Benford, Joe Haldeman, Charles Sheffield, John Varley, Kim Stanley Robinson, Geoffrey A. Landis, Robert Reed, Terry Bisson, Jack Dann, Walter Jon Williams, Nancy Kress, Ursula K. Le Guin, Mike Resnick—the list goes on and on. *Asimov's* was the crucible in which the science fiction of the past two decades was forged. Everyone who was anyone, and a good many future anyones, was part of Gardner's dazzling list of contributors.

And now, weary of trudging through mountains of manuscripts and eager to move along to less exhausting, though equally creative, tasks, Gardner has resigned and Sheila Williams takes his place. It will not be a jarring transition for the readership. Sheila has been associated with the magazine since 1982—longer than anyone in its history. She has seen not just editors but *publishers* come and go. She loves and understands science fiction, she knows the special role that *Asimov's* has played in the field over its nearly thirty years of existence, her reading tastes are wide and well informed, and it will surprise no one at all when she joins George Scithers, Shawna McCarthy, and Gardner Dozois on the roster of winners of that editorial Hugo.

Three times in the past we have seen other managing/executive editors, working quietly in the background, make extraordinary contributions to science fiction. John Campbell could not have achieved what he did at *Astounding Science Fiction* without the presence beside him of Catherine Tarrant, who for all those decades saw to it that

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Campbell's legendary intellectual volatility did not interfere with the job of meeting deadlines. When Fred Pohl was the editor of *Galaxy,* his managing editor was one Judy-Lynn Benjamin, who performed similar vital tasks for him and whose own editorial judgment was so acute that she went on to achieve even greater things in the paperback field under the name of Judy-Lynn Del Rey, immortalized now in the imprint of Del Rey Books. And Shawna McCarthy, as managing editor, kept this magazine so steady on its course that she was able to step into the editorial position on short notice and carry it forward to heights even greater than it had already reached. The spotlight now turns to Sheila Williams.

For now Gardner Dozois moves on, after reading those thousands of manuscripts and distilling from them those hundreds of issues with their scores of award-winning classics, and it is Sheila who takes his place.

A great era in science fiction ends. A new one begins this month. ❍

Editorial (continued from page 5)

There are some changes I plan to bring to the magazine, though. Starting with this issue, I will be running an intermittent nonfiction column called Thought Experiments. The column will provide diverse authors with an opportunity to write about science fiction and its effect on the world at large. These subjects could include SF and film, manga, music, and many other facets of our culture. There will be columns on SF and its influence on science and technology, and the influence of science and technology on science fiction. I also plan to run articles on the personal and public history of science fiction. The inaugural essay by Roger Ebert is a delightful look at his own experience in SF fandom during the early sixties. In an email to me, Mr. Ebert remarked on how pleased he was to have his essay appear in our magazine. We, too, are very pleased to have the essay appear here.

I also plan to run frequent editorials of my own, and I hope to return the Letters Column to *Asimov's.* Our Letters Column was quite popular when Isaac was alive. Sadly, the volume of letters dropped off sharply after his death. Over the years, readers have written in to say that they miss the column. The success of this column will depend on your participation, though. Please let us know your thoughts about the stories and essays appearing in *Asimov's.* This is, after all, your magazine and I want to hear your opinions. (Don't forget to express yourself by voting in our Readers' Award Poll. This year's ballot is on page 140.) I anticipate controversial opinions, but I expect the discourse to be polite. Please send letters to our editorial office: **Asimov's Science Fiction, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016,** or email us at: *asimovs@dellmagazines.com.* Letters will be shortened and edited for publication. The letters column should be up and running as soon as we have enough letters and enough lead time to get them into print. I look forward to hearing from all of you. ❍

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THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

Roger Ebert

HOW PROPELLER-HEADS, BNFS, SERCON GEEKS, NEWBIES, RECOVERING GAFIATORS, AND KIDS IN BASEMENTS INVENTED THE WORLD WIDE WEB, ALL EXCEPT FOR THE DELIVERY SYSTEM*

Before he became the film critic of the Chicago Sun-Times *and the co-host of the TV programs* Siskel & Ebert *and* Ebert & Roeper, *Roger Ebert was the editor and publisher of* Stymie, *an SF fanzine, and contributor of countless articles, poems, and LOCs (Letter of Comment) to many others.*

In grade school I had a paper route, and one of the homes where I threw the Champaign-Urbana *Courier* was a tarpaper wartime housing unit occupied by two University of Illinois students from Poland and their mother. When I came around to collect (20 cents a week), they'd invite me in and quiz me, perhaps because I was an odd and talkative kid who amused them. They read science fiction, and when they moved out at the end of the school year they gave me a big cardboard carton filled with old issues of *Astounding Science Fiction*—old even then, from the 1940s, with names like A.E. van Vogt, Robert Heinlein, and L. Ron Hubbard on the covers. For a time they sat in the basement, to be taken up, looked at, and put back down. I was still into *Tom Corbett, Space Cadet*. But when I was eleven or twelve, I started to read them, and then I bought my own first prozines. *Amazing* was the one most to my liking, and when a new issue hit the stands I regarded it with a certain curious quickening of attention that a year or so later I would come to identify with sexual feelings. It offered the same kind of half-understood forbidden world. I read every word of every issue, flat on my stomach, sprawled on top of the bedspread. In one of those issues there was a column reviewing new fanzines, and I sent off a dime to Buck and Juanita Coulson for a copy of *Yandro*. This was one of the most important and formative acts of my life.

By then I was reading all the prozines—*Analog, F&SF, Galaxy, If, Infinity, Imagination, Imaginative Tales, Fantastic Universe* . . . see how I can still name them. I waited impatiently for the installments of Hal Clement's *Mission of Gravity* in *ASF*. Emsh and Freas, tiny signatures at the bottom of the covers, began to mean a lot to me—and Chesley Bonestell on *F&SF*, of course. I have hundreds of mags in a closet even now, all

**See end of column for definition of notable terms.*

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with a little sticker on the inside cover that says *Roger Ebert's Science Fiction Collection*. Every five years or so, in the middle of another task, I'll look at them and a particular cover will bring memory flooding back like a madeleine. The cover of *If*, for example, illustrating the story about a toy that zapped paper clips into the fourth dimension—and what happened when they started leaking back into this one. I bought the Ballantine paperbacks by Arthur C. Clarke and Robert Sheckley, and the Ace Doubles by Murray Leinster and Eric Frank Russell. I bought the anthologies by Groff Conklin and H.L. Gold and the legendary John W. Campbell, Jr. I founded the Urbana High School Science Fiction Club; we rented "Destination Moon" and showed it in the auditorium, we went to a speech on the campus by Clarke and got his autograph, and we made a tape recording of H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds,* complete with sound effects and a performance by my classmate Dave Stiers, who later became David Ogden Stiers of *M*A*S*H*.

But all of that is beside the point. Prozines and fanzines were two different worlds, and it was in the virtual world of science fiction fandom that I started to learn to be a writer and a critic. Virtual, because for a long time I never met any other fans; they lived only in the pages of mimeographed fanzines that arrived at 410 E. Washington St. and were quickly hidden among the hundreds of SF mags in the basement, on metal shelves that cost four books of Green Stamps. "Hidden," because at first I concealed my interest in fandom from my parents. Fanzines were not offensive in any way—certainly not in a sexual way, which would have been the worst way of all in a family living in the American Catholicism of the 1950s, but I sensed somehow that they were . . . dangerous. Dangerous, because untamed, unofficial, unlicensed. It was the time of beatniks and *On the Road*, which I also read, and no one who did not grow up in the fifties will be quite able to understand how subversive fandom seemed.

Most fanzines had a small circulation of a few hundred, but they created a reality so intriguing and self-referential that, for fans, they were the newspapers of a world. Looking through old issues of *Xero*, which during its brief glory was one of the best fanzines ever published, I was stunned by how immediate and vivid my reaction was to names not thought about for years: Harry Warner Jr., Mike Deckinger, Guy Terwilliger, Gene DeWeese, Bob Lichtman, bhob Stewart (how evocative that "h" was!), Walt Willis, Bob Tucker, "Ajay" Budrys, Ted White. I met Donald Westlake as an adult (we have been on a couple of cruises together) and he was surprised to find that I was already reading him in *Xero*. I found established professionals (Harlan Ellison, Donald A. Wollheim, Anthony Boucher, Frederik Pohl, Avram Davidson, James Blish) happy to contribute to a fanzine, indeed plunging passionately into the fray. I confess happily that as I scanned pages and pages of letters of comment ("locs"), my eye instinctively scanned for my own name, as it did forty years ago, and when I found it (Blish dismissing one of my locs), I felt the same flash of recognition, embarrassment and egoboo that I felt then;

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much muted, to be sure, diluted, but still there. Locs were the currency of payment for fanzine contributors; you wrote, and in the next issue got to read about what you had written. Today I can see my name on a full-page ad for a movie with disinterest, but what Harry Warner or Buck Coulson had to say about me—well, that was important.

Wilson (Bob) Tucker was the first fan I met. He lived in Leland, a hamlet south of Bloomington, not far from Urbana. In the summer of 1958, still in high school, I was working as a reporter for the Champaign-Urbana *News-Gazette*, and was assigned to drive to Springfield to cover something at the state fair. I made a detour past his house. Bob and Fern made me feel right at home, and to meet them again I concocted a sort of fraud on my newspaper. We had a Sunday article on interior decorating, and I convinced an editor that I should write a piece about the household arrangements of one of Downstate Illinois' major writers. Well, Tucker *was* major! In the endless fanzine debates about whether SF was really literature, *The Long Loud Silence* was always cited as real literature. Bob was a movie projectionist in Bloomington who wrote in his spare time (a writer with the same talent would be a best-seller today). The Tucker home was a modest two-bedroom suburban house with attached garage— "turn left off the highway when you get to the motel." I photographed the high points of the interior decoration, which to my eye consisted of Bob's typewriter, his desk, his shelves of books, his piles of SF magazines, his framed movie posters, and the Tuckers, standing in front of various compositions of the above. This article actually ran in the paper.

A year or so after that I joined Tucker and Ed Gorman, a fan from Cedar Rapids, on a trip to the MidWestCon in Cincinnati. We drove in my family's Dodge, nearly skidding off a road in Indiana, talking all the way about fandom in a giddy rapid-fire exchange of inside jargon. At a motel in Cincinnati, I made people laugh with my reproductions of Bob and Ray routines, and drank a little beer, which felt like a lot of beer to an inexperienced drinker, and—here is the earth-shaking part—*I actually met Buck and Juanita Coulson, Dick and Pat Lupoff, and Harlan Ellison!* The Coulsons struck me as two of the nicest people I had ever met, the kind of people where you would like to move into their spare room, and the astonishingly long run of their *Yandro* was one of the monuments of fandom. The Lupoffs were enormously funny and smart New Yorkers—that city that the novels of Thomas Wolfe had forever colored in my daydreams. Harlan was—how old? Twenty? Young and cocky, with the color proofs for the cover of his new paperback that Berkeley Books was about to publish, and as he showed me the glossy reproduction, I knew envy of a desperately sincere kind.

The summer of 1961, now a student at the University of Illinois, I made my first trip to Europe on a $325 charter flight, and in Belfast visited Walt and Madeleine Willis. They invited me to tea—tomato sandwiches and Earl Grey—and took me around to meet James White, another of Belfast's BNFs (Big Name Fans), whose prozine collection was carefully wrapped in

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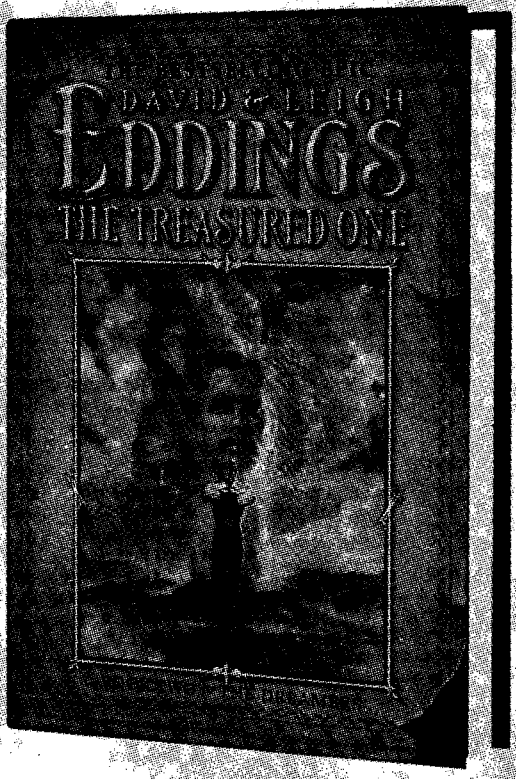

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brown parcel paper, year by year, and labeled ("*F&SF* 1957"). Fandom was a secret society and I had admission to friends everywhere who spoke the same arcane language.

In the summer of 1962, I found myself going to South Africa as the press agent for a tour of wheelchair athletes from the University of Illinois. After the long bus trip from Urbana, we stopped overnight at a motel near LaGuardia, and I called Dick and Pat Lupoff. We met for dinner at a Chinese restaurant in Times Square. Other members of our party included Lin Carter and his girlfriend, Gerry Deindorf, Walter Breen, and Ted and Sylvia White.

These meetings, these connections and conversations, were important because they existed in an alternative world to the one I inhabited. Fandom grew out of and fed a world-view that was dubious of received opinion, sarcastic, anarchic, geeky before that was fashionable. In those years it was heretical to take comic books or "Captain Video" seriously. Pop culture was not yet an academic subject. From Lenny Bruce, Stan Freberg, Harvey Kurtzman, Mort Sahl, and Bob and Ray we found an angle on America that cut through the orthodoxy of the Fifties and was an early form of what would come to be known as the Sixties.

I published my own fanzine (*Stymie*), cutting the ditto masters on an old L.C. Smith and paying an office supply company a few bucks to run it off for me. My freshman year in college I published *The Spectator*, a weekly "newspaper of politics and the arts" at the University, and this was a descendent of my fanzine. If I had only known it, I had stumbled on the format of the alternative weekly, but I didn't know enough to give it away, and the ads and circulation income weren't enough to keep it afloat; at the end of a year I sold it for two hundred dollars and joined the staff of *The Daily Illini*, then as now a great independent campus paper, and it took so much of my time that, little by little, fandom drifted out of sight.

From time to time I've heard from friends from those days. I spent time with Ed Gorman during a visit to Coe College; he became a mystery writer and wrote a novel about two movie critics who had a TV show. Harlan Ellison and I have had dinner in Los Angeles—once in the home of the eccentric film collector David Bradley, who had a concrete bunker filled with prints behind his house, and showed us the rare early cut of "The Big Sleep." I ran into Dick Lupoff in San Francisco during a book tour—he has a show on Pacifica Radio—and we remembered that New York visit, when he and Pat seemed so incomprehensibly metropolitan to me. I actually sold two stories to Ted White when he was editing *Amazing* and *Fantastic*, circa 1970.

But fan friendships, for me, were mostly long distance and conducted by mail, and the influence of fandom was on my writing voice. I became critical. I wrote smart-ass locs about other people's writing, and read them about my own. I was in a world that stood outside the mainstream. Science fiction was the occasion for fandom, and often the topic, but the subterranean subject was a kind of kibitzing outsider world view. Because of fandom, we got to 1967 ten years before most of the non-fan world.

For that matter, we were online

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before there was online. It is perfectly obvious to me that fanzines were web pages before there was a web, and locs were message threads and bulletin boards before there was cyberspace. Someday an academic will write a study proving that the style, tone, and much of the language of the online world developed in a direct linear fashion from science fiction fandom—not to mention the unorthodox incorporation of ersatz letters and numbers in spelling, later to influence the naming of computer companies and programs. Fanzines acted uncannily like mimeographed versions of Usenet groups, forums, message boards, and web pages—even to such universal design strategies as IYGTFUI (If You've Got the Font, Use It). Some of the same people segued directly from fandom to online, especially to places like the Well—not surprisingly, since many computer pioneers were also SF fans.

Today, fandom survives on the web, where it is no doubt World Wide, and some very slick fanzines have segued into prozines. Are there still analog (paper) publications called fanzines? I haven't heard that there are. That world has moved on. How long did *Yandro* last? How much is my first edition of the *Fancyclopedia* worth? Today a twelve-year-old kid in Urbana has other ways to connect with alternative ideas, other worlds to explore. No doubt they are as exciting as fandom was for me. God knows what we would have given in 1958 for the web.

But for the years of their existence, what a brave new world fanzines created! There was a rough democracy at work; no one knew how old you were unless you told them, and locs made it clear that you either had it or you didn't. First, of course, was the hurdle of getting your stuff accepted. When Lupoff or Coulson or Deckinger printed something by me, that was recognition of a kind that my world otherwise completely lacked. To look through these old pages of *Xero* even today, and find Harlan Ellison right about "Psycho" when the world was wrong, and Blish taking on Amis, is to realize that in the mimeographed pages of a fanzine created in the Lupoff living room there existed a rare and wonderful discourse, and it was a privilege to be part of it. ❍

Notable Terms:

Propeller-heads were, of course, those wearing beanies with propellers on top of them, promising instant liftoff. I expect these to come back any day now.

BNF: Big Name Fan.

Sercon Geek: Serious and Constructive Geeks.

Newbies: New to the world of fandom.

Recovering GAFIAtors: They were back in the fannish fold, having spent some time Getting Away From It All (see also GAFIAting).

Not mentioned in the article, but a personal favorite: **BEMs** (Bug-Eyed Monsters).

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Susan Palwick is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Nevada, Reno. Her first novel, *Flying in Place,* was published by Tor in 1992, and has just been reissued. Two new novels, *The Necessary Beggar* and *Shelter,* will follow from Tor later this year and in 2006. The author is currently writing her fourth novel, *Driving to November,* a fantasy set in central Nevada. She lives with her husband and three cats in Reno. Her latest story for us is a bittersweet tale about a scientist, his little girl, and . . .

THE FATE OF MICE

Susan Palwick

I remember galloping, the wind in my mane and the road hard against my hooves. Dr. Krantor says this is a false memory, that there is no possible genetic linkage between mice and horses, and I tell him that if scientists are going to equip IQ-enhanced mice with electronic vocal cords and teach them to talk, they should at least pay attention to what the mice tell them. "Mice," Dr. Krantor tells me acidly, "did not evolve from horses," and I ask him if he believes in reincarnation, and he glares at me and tells me that he's a behavioral psychologist, not a theologian, and I point out that it's pretty much the same thing. "You've got too much free time," he snaps at me. "Keep this up and I'll make you run the maze again today." I tell him that I don't mind the maze. The maze is fine. At least I know what I'm doing there: finding cheese as quickly as possible, which is what I'd do anyhow, anytime anyone gave me the chance. But what am I doing galloping?

"You aren't doing anything galloping," he tells me. "You've never galloped in your life. You're a mouse." I ask him how a mouse can remember being a horse, and he says, "It's not a memory. Maybe it's a dream. Maybe you got the idea from something you heard or saw somewhere. On TV." There's a small TV in the lab, so Dr. Krantor can watch the news, but it's not even positioned so that I can see it easily. And I ask him how watching something on TV would make me know what it *felt* like to be a horse, and he says I *don't* know what it feels like to be a horse, I have no idea what a horse feels like, I'm just making it up.

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But I remember that road, winding ahead in moonlight, the harness pulling against my chest, the sound of wheels behind me. I remember the three other horses in harness with me, our warm breath steaming in the frosty air. And then I remember standing in a courtyard somewhere, and someone bringing water and hay. We stood there for a long time, the four of us, in our harness. I remember that, but that's all I remember. What happened next?

Dr. Krantor came grumbling into the lab this morning, Pippa in tow. "You have to behave yourself," he says sternly, and deposits her in a corner.

"Mommy was going to take me to the *zoo*," she says. When I stand on my hind legs to peer through the side of the cage, I can see her pigtails flouncing. "It's *Saturday*."

"Yes, I know that, but your mother decided she had other plans, and I have to work today."

"She did *not* have other plans. She and Michael were going to take me to the *zoo*. You just hate Michael, Daddy!"

"Here," he says, handing her a piece of graph paper and some colored pens. "You can draw a picture. You can draw a picture of the zoo."

"You could have gotten a *babysitter*," Pippa yells at him, her chubby little fists clenched against her polka-dot dress. "You're *cheap*. A babysitter'd take me to the zoo!"

"I'll take you myself, Pippa." Dr. Krantor is whining now. "In a few hours. I just have a few hours of work to do, okay?"

"*Huh*," she says. "And I bet you won't let me watch TV, either! Well, *I'm* gonna talk to Rodney!"

Pippa calls me Rodney because she says it's prettier than rodent, which is what Dr. Krantor calls me: The Rodent, as if in my one small body I contain the entire order of small gnawing mammals having a single pair of upper incisors with a chisel-shaped edge. Perhaps he intends this as an honor, although to me it feels more like a burden. I am only a small white mouse, unworthy to represent all the other rodents in the world, all the rats and rabbits and squirrels, and now I have this added weight, the mystery Dr. Krantor will not acknowledge, the burden of hooves and mane.

"Rodney," Pippa says, "Daddy's scared I'll like Michael better than him. If you had a baby girl mouse and you got a divorce and your daughter's mommy had a boyfriend, would *you* be jealous?"

"Mice neither marry nor are given in marriage," I tell her. In point of fact, mice are non-monogamous, and in stressful situations have been known to eat their young, but this may be more than Pippa needs to know.

Pippa scowls. "If your daughter's mommy had a boyfriend, would you keep her from seeing your daughter *at all*?"

"Sweetheart," Dr. Krantor says, striding over to our corner of the lab and bending down, "Michael's not a nice person."

"Yes he *is*."

"No, he's not."

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"Yes he is! You're just saying that because he has a picture of a naked lady on his arm! But I see naked ladies in the shower after I go swimming with Mommy! And Michael doesn't always ride his motorcycle, Daddy! He promised to take me to the zoo in his *truck*!"

"Oh, Pippa," he says, and bends down and hugs her. "I'm just trying to protect you. I know you don't understand now. You will someday, I promise."

"I don't *want* to be protected," Pippa says, stabbing the paper with Dr. Krantor's red pen. "I want to go to the zoo with Mommy and Michael!"

"I know you do, sweetheart. I know. Draw a picture and talk to the rodent, okay? I'll take you to the zoo just as soon as I finish here."

Pippa, pouting, mumbles her assent and begins to draw. Dr. Krantor, who frequently vents his frustrations when he is alone in the lab, has told me about Pippa's mother, who used to be addicted to cocaine. Supposedly she is drug-free now. Supposedly she is now fit to have joint custody of her daughter. But Michael, with his motorcycle and his naked lady, looks too much like a drug dealer to Dr. Krantor. "If anything happened to Pippa while she was with them," he has told me, "I'd never forgive myself."

Pippa shows me her picture: a stick-figure, wearing pigtails and a polka-dot dress, sitting in a cage. "Here's my picture of the zoo," she says. "Rodney, do you ever wish you could go wherever you wanted?"

"Yes," I say. Dr. Krantor has warned me that the world is full of owls and snakes and cats and mousetraps, innumerable kinds of death. Dr. Krantor says that I should be happy to live in a cage, with food and water always available; Dr. Krantor says I should be proud of my contribution to science. I've told him that I'd be delighted to trade places with him—far be it from me to deny Dr. Krantor his share of luxury and prestige—but he always declines. He has responsibilities in his own world, he tells me. He has to take care of his daughter. Pippa seems to think that he takes care of her in much the same way he takes care of me.

"I'm *bored*," she says now, pouting. "Rodney, tell me a story."

"Sweetheart," says Dr. Krantor, "the rodent doesn't know any stories. He's just a mouse. Only people tell stories."

"But Rodney can *talk*. Rodney, do you know any stories? Tell me a story, Rodney."

"Once upon a time," I tell her—now where did that odd phrase come from?— "there was a mouse who remembered being a horse."

"Oh, *goody*!" Pippa claps her hands. "Cinderella! I love that one!"

My whiskers quiver in triumph. "You do? There's a story about a mouse who was a horse? Really?"

"Of course! Everybody knows Cinderella."

I don't. "How does it end, Pippa?"

"Oh, it's a happy ending. The poor girl marries the prince."

I remember nothing about poor girls, or about princes, either, and I can't say I care. "But what about the horse who was a mouse, Pippa?"

She frowns, wrinkling her nose. She looks a lot like her father when she frowns. "I don't know. It turns back into a mouse, I think. It's not important."

"It's important to me, Pippa."

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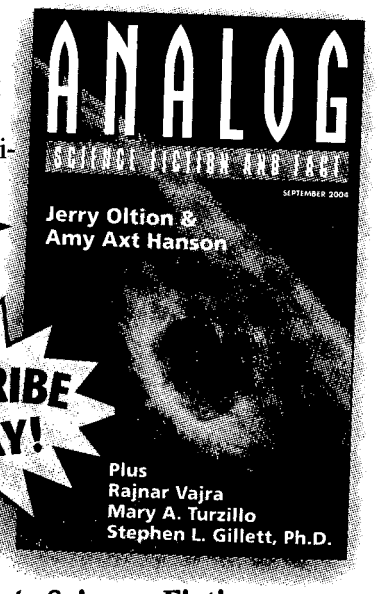

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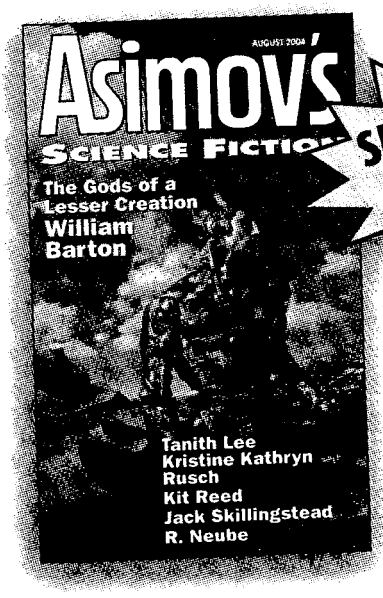

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"Okay," she says, and dutifully trudges across the lab to Dr. Krantor. "Daddy, in Cinderella, what happens to the mouse that turned into a horse when it turns back into a mouse?"

I hear breaking glassware, followed by Dr. Krantor's footsteps, and then he is standing above my cage and looking down at me. His face is oddly pale. "I don't know, Pippa. I don't think anyone knows. It probably got eaten by an owl or a cat or a snake. Or caught in a trap."

"Or equipped with IQ boosters and a vocal synthesizer and stuck in a lab," I tell him.

"It's just a story," Dr. Krantor says, but he's frowning. "It's an impossible story. It's a story about magic, not about science. Pippa, sweetheart, are you ready to go to the zoo now?"

"Now look," he tells me the next day, "It didn't happen. It *never* happened. Stories are about things that haven't happened. Somebody must have told you the story of Cinderella—"

"Who?" I demand. "Who would have told me? The only people I've ever talked to are you and Pippa—"

"You saw it on TV or something, I don't know. It's a common story. You could have heard it anywhere. Now look, rodent, you're a very suggestible little animal and you're suffering from false memory syndrome. That's very common too, believe me."

I feel my fur bristling. Very suggestible little animal, indeed!

But I don't know how I can remember a story I've never heard, a story that people knew before I remembered it. And soon I start to have other memories. I remember gnawing the ropes holding a lion to a stone table; I remember frightening an elephant; I remember being blind, and running with two blind companions. I remember wearing human clothing and being in love with a bird named Margalo. Each memory is as vivid and particular as the one about being a horse. Each memory feels utterly real.

I quickly learn that Dr. Krantor doesn't want to hear about any of this. The only thing he's interested in is how quickly I can master successively more complicated mazes. So I talk to Pippa instead, when she comes to visit the lab. Pippa knows some of the stories: the poem about the three blind mice, the belief that elephants are afraid of mice. She doesn't know the others, but she finds out. She asks her mother and her friends, her teachers, the school librarian, and then she reports back to me while Dr. Krantor is on the other side of the lab, tinkering with his computers and mazes.

All of my memories are from human stories. There are also a witch and a wardrobe in the story about the lion; the mouse who is in love with the bird is named Stuart. Pippa asks her mother to read her these stories, and reports that she likes them very much, although the story with the bird in it is the only one where the mouse is really important. And while that story, according to Pippa, ends with Stuart looking for his friend Margalo, the story never says whether or not he ever finds her. The fate of mice seems to be of little importance in human stories, even when the mouse is the hero.

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I begin to develop a theory. Dr. Krantor believes that language makes me very good at running mazes, that with language comes the ability to remember the past and anticipate the future, to plan and strategize. To humor him, I talk to myself while I run the mazes; I pause at intersections and ask myself theatrical questions, soliloquizing about the delicious cheese to be found at the end of the ordeal, recounting fond anecdotes of cheeses past. Dr. Krantor loves this. He is writing a paper about how much better I am at the mazes than previous mice, who had IQ boosting but no vocal synthesizers, who were not able to turn their quests for cheese into narrative. Dr. Krantor's theory is that language brings a quantum leap in the ability to solve problems.

But my theory, which I do not share with Dr. Krantor, is that human language has dragged me into the human world, into human tales about mice. I am trapped in a maze of story, and I do not know how to reach the end of it, nor what is waiting for me there. I do not know if there is cheese at the end of the maze, or an elephant, or a lion on a stone table. And I do not know how to find out.

And then I have another memory. It comes to me one day as I am running the maze.

In this memory I am a mouse named Algernon. I am an extremely smart mouse, a genius mouse; I am even smarter than I am now. I love this memory, and I run even faster than usual, my whiskers quivering. Someone has told a story about a mouse like me! There is a story about a very smart mouse, a story where a very smart mouse is important!

Pippa comes to the lab after school that day, scowling and dragging a backpack of homework with her, and when Dr. Krantor is working on his computer across the room, I tell her about Algernon. She has never heard of Algernon, but she promises to question her sources and report back to me.

The next day, when she comes to the lab, she tells me that the school librarian has heard of the Algernon story, but says that Pippa isn't old enough to read it yet. "She wouldn't tell me why," Pippa says. "Maybe the mouse in the story is naked?"

"Mice are always naked," I tell her. "Or else we're never naked, because we always have our fur, or maybe we're only naked when we're born, because we're furless then. Anyway, we don't wear clothing, so that can't be the reason."

"Stuart wears clothing."

"But the three blind mice don't." My personal opinion is that Stuart's a sell-out who capitulated to human demands to wear clothing only so that he could be the hero in the story. It didn't work, of course; the humans couldn't be bothered to give him a happy ending, or any ending at all, whether he wore clothing or not. His bowing and scraping did him no good.

I suspect that Algernon is non-monogamous, or perhaps that he eats his young, and that this is why the librarian considers the story unsuitable for Pippa. But of course I don't tell her this, because then her father might forbid her to speak to me altogether. I must maintain my appearance of harmlessness.

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Am I a sell-out too? I don't allow myself to examine that question too closely.

Instead I tell Pippa, "Why don't you ask your mother to find the story and read it to you?" Since Pippa's mother doesn't mind letting her see naked women in the shower, she may not share the librarian's qualms about whatever misconduct Algernon commits in the story. It makes perfect sense to me that a very smart mouse would do things of which humans would not entirely approve.

"Okay," Pippa says. "The story's called 'Flowers for Algernon,' so it must have a happy ending. Mommy gets flowers from Michael on her birthday."

"Oh, that's lovely!" I tell Pippa. I've never seen humans eating flowers—Pippa favors chocolate and once gave me a piece, which I considered an entirely inadequate substitute for seeds and stems—but my opinion of people rises slightly when I learn this. I'm very optimistic about this story.

The next day, Pippa tells me cheerfully that her mother found a copy of the story, but is reading it herself before she reads it to Pippa, just in case the librarian had a good reason for saying that Pippa shouldn't read it. This frustrates me, but I have no choice but to accept it. "I told her that you'd had a good dream about it," Pippa says happily. "She was glad."

The next day, Pippa does not come, and Dr. Krantor makes me run the maze until my whiskers are limp with exhaustion. The day after that, Pippa returns. She tells me, frowning, that her mother has finished reading the story, but agrees with the school librarian that Pippa shouldn't read it. "But I told her she had to: I told her it wasn't fair not to let me know what happens to Algernon." Her voice drops to a whisper now. "I told her she was being like Daddy, trying to keep me from knowing stuff. And that made her face go all funny, and she said, okay, she'll start reading it to me tonight."

"Thank you," I tell Pippa. I'm truly touched by her persistence on my behalf, but also a little alarmed: what in the world can have shocked both a staid school librarian and Pippa's unconventional mother?

It takes me a while to find out. Pippa doesn't come back to the lab for a week. Dr. Krantor is frantic, and as usual when he's worried, he talks to me. He paces back and forth in front of my cage. He rants. "She says it's because she has too much homework, but she can do her homework here! She says it's because her mother's taking her to the zoo after school, but how can that be true if she has all that homework? She says it's because she and her mother and Michael have to plan a trip. A trip! Her mother's brainwashing her, I know it! Michael's brainwashing both of them! I'm going to lose Pippa! They'll flee the country and take her with them! He's probably a Colombian druglord!"

"Just calm down," I tell Dr. Krantor, although I'm worried too. The string of excuses is clearly fake. I wonder if Pippa's absence has anything to do with Algernon, but of course I can't talk about that, because Dr. Krantor doesn't approve of my interest in human stories.

"Don't tell me to calm down, rodent! What would you know about it? You don't have children!"

And whose fault is that? I think sourly. Often have I asked for a com-

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panion, a female mouse, but Dr. Krantor believes that a mate would distract me from his mazes, from the quest for cheese.

He storms back to his computer, muttering, and I pace inside my cage the same way Dr. Krantor paced in front of it. What in the world is wrong with Pippa? What in the world happened to Algernon? Was he eaten by a cat, or caught in a trap? Right now I would welcome even the mazes, since they would be a distraction, but Dr. Krantor is working on something else. At last, sick of pacing, I run on my exercise wheel until I am too exhausted to think.

Finally Pippa returns. She is quieter than she was. She avoids me. She sits at the table next to Dr. Krantor's computer, all the way across the lab, and does her homework. When I stand up on my hind legs, I can see her, clutching her pencil, the tip of her tongue sticking out in concentration. And I see Dr. Krantor frowning at her. He knows she is acting oddly, too. He stands up and looks down at her workbook. "Pippa, sweetheart, why are you working so hard on that? That's easy. You already know it. Why don't you go say hello to the rodent? He missed you. We both missed you, you know."

"I have to finish my homework," she says sullenly.

"Pippa," Dr. Krantor says, frowning even more now, "your homework is done. That page is all filled out. Pippa, darling, what's the matter?"

"Nothing! Leave me alone! I don't want to be here! I want to go home!"

I'm afraid that she's going to start crying, but instead, Dr. Krantor does. He stands behind her, bawling, his fists clenched. "It's Michael, isn't it! You love Michael more than you love me! Your mother's brainwashed you! Where are they taking you, Pippa? Where are you going on this trip? Whatever your mother's said about me is a lie!"

I stare. Dr. Krantor has never had an outburst like this. Pippa, twisted around in her chair, stares too. "Daddy," she says, "it has nothing to do with you. It's not about *you*!"

He snuffles furiously and swipes at his face with a paper towel. "Well then," he says, "why don't you tell me what it's about?"

"It's about Algernon!" she says, and now she's crying, too.

I'm very afraid. Something even worse than a trap or a cat must have happened to Algernon.

It's Dr. Krantor's turn to stare. "Algernon? Who's Algernon? Your mother has a new boyfriend named Algernon? What happened to Michael? Or she has *two* boyfriends now, Michael *and* Algernon? Pippa, this is terrible! I have to get you out of there!"

"Algernon the *mouse*, Daddy!"

Dr. Krantor squints at her. "What?"

And the whole story comes out. Pippa breaks down and tells him everything, hiccupping, as I cower in my cage. Pippa's upset, and it's my fault. Dr. Krantor's going to be furious at me. He won't let me have any more cheese. He'll take away my exercise wheel. "That's why I've been staying away," Pippa says. "Because of Algernon. Because of what happens to Algernon. Daddy—"

"It's just a story," Dr. Krantor says. It's what I expect him to say. But then he says something I don't expect. "Pippa, you have to tell the rodent—"

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"His name's Rodney, Daddy!"

"You have to tell Rodney what happened, all right? Because he's been waiting to find out, and he can hear us talking, and not knowing will make him worry more. It's just a story, Pippa. Nothing like that has happened to my mice, the ones here in the lab. I promise. Come on. I'll help you."

Astonished, I watch Dr. Krantor carry Pippa across the lab to my cage. "Pippa," he says when he gets here, "Rodney's missed you. Say hello to Rodney. Do you want to hold him?"

She snuffles and nods, shyly, and Dr. Krantor says, "Rodney, if Pippa holds you, you won't run away, right?"

"No," I say, even more astonished than I was before. Pippa's never been allowed to hold me before, because Dr. Krantor's afraid that she might drop me, and I represent a huge investment of research dollars. But now Dr. Krantor opens the top of the cage and lifts me out by my tail, the way he does when he's going to put me in the maze; but instead he puts me in Pippa's cupped palms, which are very warm. She peers down at me. Her breath is warm too, against my fur, and I see tears still shining in the corners of her eyes.

"See?" Dr. Krantor tells her. "Rodney's a very healthy mouse. He's fine, Pippa. There's nothing wrong with him, even though he's smart."

I don't understand this, and nobody's answering the main question. "What happens to Algernon?" I ask.

"He dies," Pippa says in a tiny voice.

"Oh," I say. Well, I'd deduced as much. "A cat gets him, or a mousetrap?" And Pippa's face starts to crumple as she strokes my back, and I hear Dr. Krantor sigh.

"Rodney," he says, "In the story 'Flowers for Algernon,' the mouse Algernon has been IQ-boosted, the way you are. Only the story was written before that was really possible. Anyway, in the story, the mouse dies as a result of the experiment."

"He dies because he's smart," Pippa says mournfully. "Except he gets stupid first. The experiment wears off, and he gets stupid again, and then he dies! The flowers are for his grave!"

"Right," Dr. Krantor says. "Now listen to me, you two. It's *just a story*. None of my mice have died prematurely as a result of the IQ boosting, and the IQ boosting hasn't worn off on any of them. All my mice stay smart, and they don't die any sooner than they would anyway. If anything, they live longer than non-enhanced mice. Okay? Does everybody feel better now?"

"But how did they die?" I ask, alarmed. "How could they die if they were here in their cages, where there aren't any owls or cats or snakes or mousetraps?"

Dr. Krantor shakes his head. "They just died, Rodney. They died of old age. All mice die, sometime. But they had good lives. I take care of my animals."

"What?" I say stupidly. All mice die? "I'm going to die? Even if there aren't any cats?"

"Not anytime soon," Dr. Krantor says. "Everything dies. Didn't you

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know that?" A drop of water splashes on me, and Dr. Krantor says, "Pippa, sweetheart, you don't have to cry. Rodney's fine. He's a healthy little mouse. Pippa, dear, if you're going to drown him, you'd better put him back in his cage."

And he helps her put me back in my cage, and he says he's going to take her out for ice cream, and he'll bring back some special cheese for me, and I won't even have to run a maze to get it, and they'll be back in a little while. All of these words buzz over me in a blur, as I huddle in my cage trying to make sense of what I've just learned.

I'm going to die.

I'm going to die. All mice die. That's why the stories about mice never say what happened to them, because everyone knows. The mice died. The mouse who became a horse died, and the mice who freed the lion died, and Stuart Little died. I curl into a ball in a corner of my cage and think about this, and then I uncurl and run very hard on my exercise wheel, so I won't have to think about it.

You have taught me language, and my profit on it is, I know how to fear.

Where did that line come from? I don't know, and it's not even really true. I feared things before I knew that I must die; I feared cats and snakes and mousetraps. But fear was always a reason to avoid things, and now I fear something I cannot avoid. I run on the exercise wheel, trying to flee the thing I have learned I cannot escape.

Dr. Krantor and Pippa come back. He has brought me a lovely piece of cheese, an aged cheddar far richer than what I usually find at the end of the maze. He and Pippa sit and watch me nibble at it, and then he says, "Are you all right, Rodney? Do you feel better now?"

"No," I tell him. "You aren't really protecting me by keeping me in this cage, are you? You can't protect me. I'm going to die anyway. You aren't keeping me safe from death; you're denying me life." I think of my memo-

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ries, the joy of galloping down the road, of chewing through rope, of loving a bird. "You're depriving me of experience. Dr. Krantor, please let me go."

"Let you go?" he says. "Rodney, don't be ridiculous! There are still cats and snakes and mousetraps out there. You'll live much longer this way. And you represent a huge investment of research dollars. I can't let you go."

"I'm not an investment," I snap at him. "I'm a creature! Let me go!"

Dr. Krantor shakes his head. "Rodney, I can't do that. I really can't. I'm sorry. I'll buy you a new exercise wheel, okay? And a bigger cage? There are all kinds of fancy cages with tunnels and things. We can make you a cage ten times bigger than this one. Pippa, you can help design Rodney's new cage. We'll go to the pet store and buy all the parts. It will be fun."

"I don't want a new exercise wheel," I tell him. "I don't want a new cage. I want to be free! Pippa, he says he can't let me go, but remember when he said you couldn't go to the zoo? It's the same thing."

"It's not the same thing at all," Dr. Krantor says. His voice isn't friendly anymore. "Rodney, I'm getting very annoyed with you. Pippa, don't you have more homework to do?"

"No," she says. "I already did my homework. The page is all filled out."

"Well then," Dr. Krantor says. "We'll go to the pet store—"

"I don't want you to go to the pet store! I want you to let me go! Pippa—"

"Stop trying to brainwash her!" Dr. Krantor bellows at me.

I can feel my tail flicking in fury. "You're the one brainwashing her!"

"Stop it," Pippa says. She's put her thumb in her mouth, muffling her words, and she looks like she's going to cry again. "Stop it! I hate it when you fight!"

We stop. I feel miserable. I wonder how Dr. Krantor feels. Pippa goes back to the table where her homework is, and Dr. Krantor goes back to his computer, and I nibble disconsolately on the excellent cheddar. No one says anything. After a while, Dr. Krantor comes back over to my cage and asks wearily, "All right, Rodney. Ready for the maze?"

"Are you out of your mind? I'm not going to run any more mazes! Why should I? What's in it for me?"

"Cheese!"

"I've had enough cheese today." I'm being ungracious, I know. I should thank him for the excellent cheddar. But I'm too angry to mind my manners.

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"It's for my research, Rodney!"

"I don't *care* about your research, you imbecile!"

Dr. Krantor curses; Pippa, at her table, has covered her ears. Dr. Krantor reaches into my cage. He lifts me by the tail, none too gently, and plunks me down at the beginning of the maze. "Go," he says.

"Go groom yourself!"

He stomps away. I sit in the maze and clean my whiskers, fastidiously, and then I curl into a ball and take a nap.

I wake to feel myself being lifted into the air again. Dr. Krantor puts me back in my cage, even more roughly than he took me out, and says, "All right, Rodney. Look, this has all been a terrible mess, and I'm very sorry, but if you aren't willing to work tomorrow, we're going to have a problem."

"Going to?" I say.

Dr. Krantor rubs his eyes. "Rodney. Don't do this. You're expendable."

"I am? Even though I represent a tremendous investment of research dollars? Well then, you should have no problem letting me go."

He glares down at me. "Don't do this. Please don't do this. There are things I can do to make you compliant. Drugs. Electric shocks. I don't want to do any of that, and I know you don't want me to either. I want to keep a good working relationship here, all right, Rodney? Please?"

"You're threatening to torture me?" Outrage makes my voice even squeakier than usual. "Great working relationship! Hey, Pippa, did you hear that? Did you hear what your father just said?"

"Pippa isn't here, Rodney. Her mother came to pick her up while you were asleep. They were going to a birthday party. Rodney: will you run the maze tomorrow, or will I have to resort to other methods?"

I'm frightened now. Dr. Krantor's voice is calm, reasonable. He's very matter of fact about the prospect of torturing me, and Pippa isn't here as a witness. He's probably bluffing. Coercion would probably compromise his data. But I don't know that for sure.

"Rodney?" he says.

"I'll think about it," I tell him. I have to buy myself time. Now I know why Stuart bowed and scraped. People are so much bigger than we are.

"Good enough," he says, his voice gentler, and reaches into the cage to give me another piece of the excellent cheddar. "Have a good night, Rodney." And then he leaves.

I stay awake all night, fretting. I try to find some way to escape from my cage, but I can't. I wonder if I could escape from the maze; I've never tried, but surely Dr. Krantor has made the mazes secure also. I don't know what to do.

I dread the morning.

But in the morning, when Dr. Krantor usually arrives, I hear three sets of footsteps in the hallway outside, and two voices: Dr. Krantor's and a woman's.

"Why do you have to take her on this trip in the middle of the school year?" Dr. Krantor says. "And why do you have to talk to me about it now?"

"I already told you, Jack! Michael's family reunion in Ireland is in a

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month, so if we go we have to go then, and I need you to sign this letter saying that you know I'm not kidnapping her. I don't want any trouble."

Dr. Krantor grumbles something, and the lab door opens. Dr. Krantor and the woman—Pippa's mother!—come inside, still arguing. Pippa comes inside too. Pippa's mother walks to the computer; Pippa races to my cage.

"How *do* I know you aren't kidnapping her?" Dr. Krantor says. "Pippa, there's more of the new cheese over here, if you want to give Rodney a nice breakfast."

"Pippa," I whisper, "he threatened to torture me! Pippa—"

"Shhhhh," she whispers back, and opens my cage, and reaches into one of her pockets. "Don't make any noise, Rodney."

She's holding a mouse. A white mouse, just like me. Pippa puts the new mouse in the cage and we stare at each other in surprise, nose to nose, whiskers twitching, but then I feel Pippa grasp the base of my tail. She lifts me, and I watch the new mouse receding, and then she puts me in her pocket. I hear the cage close, and then we're walking across the room.

"All right, Jack, here's the itinerary, see? Here on this map? Jack, look at the map, would you? I'll tell you every single place we're going; it's not like we're spiriting her away without telling you."

"But how do I know you'll really go there? You could take her to, to, Spain or the South Pole or—"

"Michael doesn't have a family reunion in Spain or the South Pole. Jack, be reasonable."

"I'm bored," Pippa says loudly. "I'm going outside."

"Stay right by the front door, sweetheart!" That's Dr. Krantor, of course.

"I will," she says, and then I hear the lab door open and we're out, we're in the hallway, and then we go through another door and I smell fresh air and Pippa lifts me out of her pocket. She sits down on a step and holds me up to her face. "Mommy and I went to the pet store last night, Rodney, and we got another mouse who looks just like you. He was in the cage of mice people buy to feed to their snakes. Being here is better for him. Daddy won't feed him to a snake."

"But your father will torture the other mouse," I say, "or worse. When he realizes it's just an ordinary mouse he'll be very angry. Pippa, he'll punish you."

"No, he won't," she says cheerfully, "or Mommy and Michael will say he isn't taking good care of me." She puts me down on the warm cement step. I feel wind and smell flowers and grass. "You're free, Rodney. You can have your very own adventures. You don't have to go back to that stupid maze."

"How will I find you?" I tell her. As much as I yearned for freedom before, I'm terrified. There really are cats and snakes and mousetraps out here, and I've never had to face them. How will I know what to do? "Pippa, you have to meet me so I can tell you my stories, or no one will know what happens to me. I'll be just like all those other mice, the ones whose stories just stop when they stop being useful to the main characters. Pippa—"

But there are footsteps now from inside, forceful footsteps coming clos-

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er, and Dr. Krantor's voice. His voice sounds dangerous. "Pippa? Pippa, what did you do to the rodent? It won't talk to me! I don't even think it's the same mouse! Pippa, did you put another mouse in that cage?"

I find myself trembling as badly as I would if a cat were coming. Pippa stands up. The sole of her sneaker is the only thing I can see now. From very far above me I hear her saying, "Run, Rodney."

And I do. O

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INVASION OF THE AXBEAKS

Phillip C. Jennings

The author tells us that he works with arcane software on four computers—John, Paul, George, and Ringo—at a rather sizeable law firm in Minneapolis. Inspiration for "Invasion of the Axbeaks" came from a visit to Santa Fe. "Friends there have parrots; birds with intelligence, big personalities, and curmudgeonly obsessions."

Axbeaks are the top predator on Mullins' Planet. That's the first, second, and final thing anyone wants to know about them. *Newsflash over. Make sure the doors are locked, switch to the Entertainment Channel.*

This has never been an easy story to tell. I can't spin it down to the level of the channel-surfing multitudes. That's why I'm on this island.

People want simple truths. Whatever the truth is, it's not simple.

Another thing—my story isn't about *me.* When I thought it was and told it like that, the jury put me away. I'm not going to make that mistake again.

My grandmother was a novelist. She was an expert at telling stories. A literary lioness, she had a lot of advice. "Show, don't tell," and wisdom like that. Yes, but she wasn't successful with her books, or she and Grandpa wouldn't have worked for Dick the Drunk; excuse me, *Richard Thanet the Third.*

Everything about the Thanets was contagious: the pride, the idiocy. In service to rich idiots, our family yearned to be rich ourselves. Thanks to Dad and the Texa-Bishi Corporation, we achieved our goal. I spent my teenage years living a flush life in Thanet Mansion.

My name is Petronius Mullins. Dad is Ted Mullins. He's the discoverer of Mullins' Planet. I suppose we could start with him.

No. Let's start with the poor sods who went down to anchor the skyhook, the first people to set foot on Mullins' Planet. Until that time, all the xenologists knew was what they saw from space: forests of bamboozle, herds of dustraisers, that sort of thing.

Sure, they were careful. They'd have been careful if Mullins' Planet was only a young water-oxygen world, with life no more sophisticated than al-

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gae. But it's one of just four we know of with large complex fauna, so they went down toting guns as well as test tubes.

They wouldn't have made it otherwise. Those first axbeaks would have got them. They weren't even the *smarter* axbeaks. They were the sexual sort. So everything came together—first encounter, first attack, a perfect newsflash. I was still a schoolboy in Thanet Mansion when I saw the pictures.

Those dead axbeaks looked like giant parrots with naked red skin. But their eyes were set too close for parrots and they didn't have wings. Think about eight-foot-tall basketball-hero tyrannosaurs with huge beaks, sinewy arms, horror-movie fingers, and stubby tails. I couldn't get enough of them, despite the media overkill. The TV newswagons even came out to the mansion. Luckily, we had a wrought-iron fence around the place.

Dad finally agreed to a press release. Mullins' Planet was Dad's discovery. He'd found it. Hell, according to the law, he *owned* it. I was just a kid when everything happened and Texa-Bishi Corporation became part of our lives. Back before all the riches and fame, seeing Dad's tattooed arm hang out the window of his rattletrap truck, you wouldn't have thought he was anyone special. But Dad went into hock to buy a twenty-eight-day timeshare of a Seattle-class slinkship. Every year, he flew into the unknown, hoping to make his fortune.

If Dad were here now, he'd make me stop the story and talk about the physics of the universe. About mini-mag drives and Alfden's slinky, "points of equipose" and all that stuff. He'd love it if I could insert a film clip, because a slinkship with her plasma coils glowing is the most beautiful sight you can imagine.

When Dad was a boy, people didn't own spaceships. Not even rich people like the Thanets. Dick Thanet had a yacht, but the *Blue Mum* was a watercraft. She was commandeered for the Last War, and the Thanets never got her back.

Grandpa worked the *Blue Mum*. He piloted her up and down the St. Lawrence, around the Great Lakes, and among the Thousand Islands.

Grandpa's dad had been a sculptor in Italy. Great-Grandpa came to America rather than join the Stoneworkers' Union. Politics were involved, and a lot of hard feelings, and then a violent change of government. That's why "Molinari" became "Mullins."

And *Great-Grandpa's* dad had been a professor in Trieste. Grimaldo Molinari dedicated twenty years of his life to a book on the Proto-Indo-European verb, as exemplified in Hittite.

We know these things about our family. We're freaks that way. Most people hardly know their grandparents. Hell, Sharon barely knew her *mother*. I'll tell you how bad Sharon was: when she worked on fixing herself up, she told me her mom got a check from Alaska every month. Despite her freckles and curly red hair, Sharon fantasized about getting on the tribal rolls so that she could get some money too. Except that she couldn't remember what tribe she supposedly belonged to!

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I went southwest to get some culture, to a college with a Great Works curriculum, but being on my own with more than enough money meant that I explored the local restaurants. That's where I met Sharon Bladowsky.

It was not love at first sight. She was hung-over. Santa Fe's welfare people had taken her twins and her life was on the skids. So there she was, fat, nasty-tempered, waiting on tables. I remember her that first time because her clothes fit so badly that my college friends made bets about when her seams were going to split.

She didn't notice me, not a snotty college kid. Not until my gang went a second time and someone called me "Mullins." *Then* she made inquiries.

I was a freshman. Hormones were bubbling, and I had only the weakest of reasons not to call myself a virgin. Sharon had no compunctions. *Go to her place. Get sex. Leave a token of appreciation.* That's how it was. It stayed that way through the winter. Thanks to my "appreciations," Sharon kept in drink, bought a new wardrobe, and stopped showing up for her job at the restaurant.

By spring, I knew I was involved with a woman no one could handle. Sharon was out of control, binge-feeding all her addictions. Escape was easy. I went home to Thanet Mansion for the summer and arranged a sophomore year abroad. Back to Trieste, town of my ancestors!

I sure as hell knew better than to tell Dad about Sharon.

In his exploring days, Dad went out, choosing a random direction. It was all luck, but it was *digital* luck, which meant key the same number, get back to the same place. A mini-magnetosphere drive isn't just for looks; it's massive protection when you're off to the unknown. Some places Dad went were stormy with radiation, to the extent that he had one chance in thirty of coming back fried past hope. More often, he found feeble dwarf stars. This time, though, Dad hit the jackpot. His spectroscope went *ping,* spiking for water, then spiking for oxygen!

Frustration set in. Getting visuals of the planet took long hours. Finally, the ship's computer fixed on a course, and Dad sailed in toward a blue-green jewel.

I imagine him at perigee, looking out a window and saying, "Mine, all mine!" Dad wanted his descendants to live like kings, like the Thanets of old. We'd own Mullins' Planet, and our subjects . . .

That was the problem. Getting somebody *else* to do the work. Finding money for a Mullins' Planet skyhook. Dad wasn't our family's best negotiator, but the process was already worked out. As soon as he returned to Earth High Orbit, the authorities plugged into Dad's black box, and a bunch of companies made bids.

Texa-Bishi won the draw. They got a 299-year lease to do what they wanted with Mullins' Planet.

The government, that decade anyhow, wasn't friendly to the idea of giving away whole planets to individual companies forever. That's why things were set up this way. That's what gave incentive to explorers like Dad. He, his heirs, assigns, and descendants to the seventy-seventh degree of consanguinity, shared ownership of Mullins' Planet, and mean-

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while, as a genuine reward—not merely hypothetical—we got a whopping 8 percent share in the ownership of Texa-Bishi.

Eight percent was enough for Dad to vote himself onto the board of directors. He took the responsibility seriously. Grandma said it turned him into a pompous ass.

"Look who's talking," Dad sassed back. "At least I don't see ghosts all over the place."

According to my literary Grandma, Thanet Mansion was haunted. Long-dead ancestral Thanets objected to the way we'd remodeled the interior.

Dad designated me the heir to his directorship when eventually someday he chose to retire. As his only son, this was to be my role in life. I was in Trieste to learn, and I lodged with the local Texa-Bishi rep. My host family had run a shipping agency since the days of Empress Maria Theresa, and they had a daughter.

Irene taught me about intelligence in women, about elegance, wit, and self-respect. Her English was perfect, she loved antique books more than shoes, and her collection of both was impressive. But she was already engaged to be married. I wasted time falling in love with her. My year ended and I went back to Santa Fe.

Sharon found me within the month. She'd sworn off booze and lost weight. "I should hate you," she said. "You dropped me without even a phone call."

"It's over between us," I said. Thinking of Irene, I concocted a wishful lie: "I'm involved with someone else."

"It's not over, Pete. I want my two sons back. And you're going to help me, Mr. *Petronius Mullins.* You'll help me because *guess where they are!* The county welfare people *sold 'em off!* Did you know that Texa-Bishi Corporation was in the foster-care business? Mullins' Planet, that's where!"

"That's not possible," I said. "How old are these kids?"

"Old enough for work," Sharon said, spitting fury with every word. "Sold into slave labor! Who keeps an eye on Texa-Bishi? They've got the whole planet to themselves! Who keeps them honest?"

"It's not like that," I said. "Not enough people want to colonize. The space companies have to treat them nice. They compete with each other for skilled workers."

"They steal kids," Sharon said. "I want mine *back!* How dare they take them light-years away? It shouldn't be legal! I don't think it *is* legal!"

I escaped Sharon by promising to look into the matter. "Start with a phone call tonight," she said. "I've changed my life and I want my twins back. I want them back before they forget their mother completely!"

At this point, Sharon the drama queen began to cry. I fled the scene. I could still outrun her. She hadn't lost *that* much weight.

I got Dad on the phone, but not that night, not with the two-hour time difference. "What's this about Texa-Bishi taking foster kids to Mullins' Planet?" I asked.

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"Foster kids? You've got it wrong," Dad said. "There's a program involving orphans. It's completely above-board. Enriched environment, plenty of loving care, and all that stuff. I don't know why colonists don't rush to Mullins' Planet, the way we treat them. We could take five thousand a month, but we share that number with all the other new worlds. Meanwhile, explorers keep discovering more places."

"I know a woman who says her twins were taken to Mullins' Planet without her permission," I said.

"Like we could afford that kind of bad publicity," Dad grumbled.

"We should send out a news crew to make a documentary," I said. "Fight bad publicity by doing our own good publicity."

"Well, you know, there are a few technical glitches. I'll take that up with the board next time we meet. It's not a bad idea," Dad said.

"The board has to approve?" I asked.

"Texa-Bishi has total control of things like that through the duration of their lease," Dad said.

"But what about *us*? We *own* Mullins' Planet, right? They couldn't keep us away if we wanted to go there. It's high time one of us set foot on the place!"

"There's plenty of future ahead for that," Dad said. "Almost three centuries."

"Aren't you curious?" I asked. "Think how useful it would be as a director to have trusted eyes and ears on site."

"Among the axbeaks, eh? This woman who's got your balls in a twist, she wouldn't be a piece of trash called Sharon Bladowsky?"

I answered faintly. "You know about her?"

"You can get court protection. My lawyers will see to it. Focus on your studies. Don't let her bother you. Some people are shit."

"Why are you saying this? It's like you don't want me to go to Mullins' Planet," I said. "What's the big deal?"

"Pete, how can you be a director of Texa-Bishi if you're light-years away when they have their board meetings?" Dad asked. He chose his words with care, but I heard a world of emotion behind them.

"I'm not going to *stay* on Mullins' Planet," I said. "I'll just go and come back again."

"Is that what you think? I wonder if you understand the realities," Dad said. "Rich kid snaps his fingers and everything happens his way! Let's get serious. I want you to stay here on Earth, in college, and away from that tramp Sharon. That's all. Now I'm going to take some pills, because of this phone call, because I'm all stressed-out. Are you still there?"

"Uh, yes." I wasn't happy.

"Did you hear me? *Did I get through?*"

I sighed. "I heard you. Okay." This was obviously no time to negotiate a compromise, so I hung up.

Dad usually enjoyed being irascible, but clearly he hadn't enjoyed this last phone call. That worried me. I spent the next days doing research, with help from the college librarians. Sharon rang me repeatedly, but I was careful not to answer.

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I looked into the wording of our family's contract with Texa-Bishi. I looked into Texa-Bishi's corporate history, which stretched back decades before the Last War. Nothing seemed sinister.

Dad hired me a couple of bodyguards. Abe and Hector introduced themselves and gave me a body-tag to wear "in case you get kidnapped." I let them "enhance" my phone. They were unobtrusive, but I felt like a prisoner.

The result was that I started thinking more and more about Sharon. I hadn't had sex for a long time. That bothered me. My guards reported to Dad any time I went out with a girl, which cramped my style. All in all, I wasn't happy.

In this awkward frame of mind, I didn't object when Sharon came to me one Saturday, wearing a long black wig. I was strolling around the Santa Fe plaza, it was crowded, and maybe Abe and Hector had given themselves a break.

"I'm lonely," she said. "Don't *you* get lonely?"

"Yes," I said.

"Let's go."

An hour later, we were in bed. A couple of hours after that, we were in the Albuquerque airport, buying tickets for Brazil. My body-tag was in a ditch about forty miles north.

Airport robo-security was a joke, of course. My bodyguards killed my cash privileges and the ticket machines and intercoms buzzed warnings, but we got on the jet to Bottomside just fine. Not a direct flight, but Sharon whispered in my ear to distract me through the transfer in Mexico City.

The final leg featured wide seats, food, and live entertainment. Prospective colonists to other planets are treated like kings and queens. "This doesn't look like a slave-labor situation to me," I said. "Slave life must be pretty fine!"

Sharon scoffed. "They won't know the truth until it's too late."

"Dad says that Texa-Bishi only takes orphans, not foster kids," I said. "I looked into things. I called the New Mexico Department of Public Welfare. The Bladowsky kids were listed as orphans."

"I was high a lot back then," Sharon said. "I signed a ton of papers to stay out of jail. God knows what they said. There was a lot of fine print. That can't change reality."

"You know what reality is?" I asked. "You're going out to Mullins' Planet. You'll find your kids. You'll like it in the Habitation Zone, and you'll settle down together, jobs guaranteed. That's the Texa-Bishi promise. Everybody on Mullins' Planet has a job and a salary, just by being there. They use computers to match your talents to their needs."

"Nice," Sharon sneered. "A perfect utopia."

"Why do you—the hell with it. We'll get there, and then we'll know."

"I know your mind," Sharon said. "You have doubts too. Your Dad has you freaked. So let's find the truth. I hope it's what you think, but I don't believe corporate promises. It's all nothing but the bottom line with Texa-Bishi. That's the cruel truth about big business everywhere."

* * *

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We reached Bottomside and got processed. Dad knew where we were by now, but the skyhook was universal sanctuary. Once there, we were under skyhook administration. No other jurisdictions applied. The space companies liked it that way. It encouraged colonization.

But maybe not. Grandma did this analysis, how space travel was getting a raffish reputation. Think about it. "Slinkships." And instantaneous travel between points of equipose was known as a "God cheat." Fundamentalist sects took this seriously: Humans were meant to stay on Earth, not trespass into God's domain.

Bottomside was set up for non-fundy colonists who wanted a last fling before they got on the elevator. Riding the walkways among jazz bars and casinos and hash houses, Sharon said, "They won't have this stuff on Mullins' Planet. I'll be able to keep clean."

"Unless you've got cash, we're clean anyhow. Clean broke," I said.

"Let's see if we can get a line of credit," Sharon said.

Sure enough, it was easy. We spent the night at the Clarke Hotel. Next morning, Hector and Abe met us in the lobby with appeals and letters, but they couldn't stop us. Skyhook guards escorted us to the shuttlebus.

Slinkship crews rode an express elevator to Earth High Orbit. It took three days. For us colonists, the twenty-plus-thousand mile trip took nine, with check-stops along the way. The elevator we stepped into was a jumbo coffin with seats and infotrons for a hundred and forty. It was filled to half-capacity. We were magbelted in and had to buzz to go to the bathroom.

Our videos were educational. "So, you're off to Mullins' Planet!" the lecture began. "Texa-Bishi Corporation values your safety. Wild axbeaks keep out of the Habitation Zone, but nonetheless you'll want to memorize a long piece of poetry, fifty lines at minimum. Look in front of you. You'll find unique verses, selected at random from great works of the past.

"What is it about poetry that fascinates axbeaks? Rhyme and meter, far more than meaning," the video narrator explained. "We don't know for sure that axbeaks *have* language, not even the amazons, sterile females more intelligent and social than the fertile male and female axbeaks.

"But axbeaks have a gift for phonemes. Their vocal gifts are astonishing. There's no sound they can't imitate to perfection.

"Believe me, despite their impressive abilities, *axbeaks are predators.* The amazons hunt and kill the sexuals among their own kind, to keep the population down, but also as their favorite food. They'll eat *you* too, but not if you chant your poem at them. We're not sure why. Maybe they take the poem as a gift, a new phonemic pattern. Maybe our ability to recite convinces them that we're a *semi*-intelligent species, smart enough to be interesting.

"We lost a few people before we made this discovery about axbeaks, and we lost more before we learned that each of you has to memorize a *unique* poem. A poem used by someone else has lost its power. We can only speculate why—but if you're put off by memorizing fifty lines of verse, then for your safety never leave the Zone. Keep inside the perimeter. That's a good idea anyway."

"Or just carry a gun with lots of bullets," Sharon muttered. She wasn't

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happy. By the luck of the draw, she'd gotten a piece by William Blake called *On Another's Sorrow*;

Can I see another's woe,
And not be in sorrow too.
Can I see another's grief,
And not seek for kind relief.

It went on like that, Christian and gloomy. I was pleased with my cheerful *Ballad of Abdul Abulbul Amir and Ivan Skavinski Skavar.* It had a tune, and, fortunately, axbeaks don't mind music, however talentless the singer's voice.

Out of seventy-some passengers, twenty were heading for Mullins' Planet. The same number muttered through the next hours, consigning poems to memory. By lights-out the other fifty passengers were ready to rebel. They were off to simple pre-Cambrian planets that boasted algae as their supreme accomplishment. In an interplanetary economy where DNA, seedstocks, and exotic bio-products were valued exports, they were making oddly wrong choices.

Scumwater and desert land. But at least there were no axbeaks to worry about.

We twenty, on the other hand, got video theories about the axbeak character. Axbeaks didn't know compromise. They'd make wretched Buddhists and pisspoor Christians. If an axbeak was in bad sorts with her environment, the idea that she should amend *herself* would never occur to her.

Axbeaks had been attuned to Mullins' Planet for so long that they had no need for introspection or flexibility.

This didn't make axbeaks predictable. We had "ambassador" amazons in the Habitation Zone who would never kill and eat a colonist, such being their—character?—resolve?—oath? And we were glad to study them while they studied us.

Other amazons outside the perimeter were largely hostile. Even when a human recited to perfection, they'd do their threat dance, squirt shit in the campfire, and caw death-shrieks from their repertoire of past human victims. All this made it hard to generalize.

To generalize, however: humans were a weasely situation-ethics species. Xenologists agreed that axbeaks were magnificent in their inability to compromise. The unspoken message? *Axbeaks were superior.*

We reached Earth High Orbit and had a few days before the biweekly slinkship to Mullins' Planet. I got a phone call from Dad, and was disturbed by his conviction that I'd never return to Earth. "Why not?" I asked. "The same ships that go to Mullins' Planet fly home again. Surely seats are available."

"I saw its beauty," Dad said. "I hung in orbit, looking down on that deep green forest, all those rivers, the terraced landscape. Except for a hundred square miles, it's still that way." He spoke again. "I'd like to retire there. I meant for you to take over and for me to have the joy. Shouldn't an old man have that right?"

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"You aren't old. And I'm coming back, because I say so. I can be just as stubborn as an axbeak. But what does Mom think about your retirement?"

"She'll come. If she doesn't, she'll have the mansion. But I'm going anyhow. *War or no war.*"

"What war?" Had things changed on Earth since I'd left Santa Fe?

"You're my son, or I wouldn't have said that. *Fill in the blanks.*" Dad hung up with a click.

These words shocked me, but I was young, and controlled by a woman whose moods dictated whether or not I'd have sex. Mom and Dad's relationship was superior to mine with Sharon, so what Dad said about retirement without Mom didn't make sense—unless I didn't understand much about human nature.

And what he'd said about war was off-the-charts incomprehensible.

These last hours I wasn't having sex because Sharon and zero-gravity didn't get along. She chose to be put under. She slept the whole way to Mullins' Planet, connected to pump-feeds in a public medical ward. During the voyage, I spent my time with the slinkship crew and a handful of passengers, trading life stories.

On a recent trip, this same ship had carried a Siberian snow tiger in her hold. The idea was to confront the axbeaks with one of Earth's top predators, although this was a zoo tiger and not very cunning. He didn't last long. "The axbeaks want a Kodiak bear next," the ship's captain said. "Only we're out of the animal-transport business. It doesn't seem moral."

"The *axbeaks* have asked?" I repeated. "I thought they didn't have language."

The crew looked at me. "They know language fine," the captain said. "It's just that they do so much other stuff that they overwhelm us. That's my theory. Everybody's got a theory."

"We're still the only species that uses tools, builds cities, farms the land, and enjoys indoor plumbing," another crewperson said. "Axbeaks have two hands and eight fingers. Their arms hinge just like ours. But they don't *make* things, not even hunting weapons. That makes them smart, dangerous animals, no more than that."

The captain shrugged. Our conversation moved on to dogs and other smart species, and then we trotted out stupid human stories. Since I was the son of the famous Ted Mullins, everyone was interested in what I said about the Thanet dynasty, destroyed by the bizarre investments of Dick the Drunk, who finally sold us Thanet Mansion and retired to a lake cottage. "By the law of averages, some of his schemes should have worked," I said. "There were so many, and so much money."

"We transported a Thanet, didn't we?" the captain asked, looking among his crew. "Some recent trip, girl about your age. She was a xenobiologist."

"If she's got an advanced degree, she's older," I said. "A Thanet on Mullins' World! That's weird. We were a family of servants, and now this!"

The captain clicked his keyboard and brought up a picture. "*This* is why we remember Jane Thanet."

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"Wow."

"You'll run into her. There's only—what? Thirty thousand people in the Zone? Thirty thousand on the whole planet?"

"Including the orphans? What do you know about the orphans?" I asked. "We'll want to check on them."

"They're east, near the perimeter," someone said. "Can you run heavy equipment? If so, Texa-Bishi will put you to work on the perimeter."

"East side is where they get most of their sightings," the captain said. "The first massed attack back in Year One was on the east side."

"That's why we keep widening the moat," another crewperson said.

Texa-Bishi had a system of education credits. I took video courses to keep busy during the trip to Mullins' Planet. I learned about the first and second axbeak attacks, aimed at wiping out the human colonists.

We used razor-wire and caltrops to defend ourselves the first time. The second time, the axbeaks wore "boots" of wadded greens against the caltrops, but remained nimble enough to jump the razor-wire. The second time, we used machine-guns to defeat them.

The Texa-Bishi Corporation was now preparing for the third time. A third massed attack. A *war.* This Dad knew about, but nobody said squat, because Texa-Bishi didn't want to discourage colonization.

An army of amazon axbeaks could defeat machine-guns by driving a herd of a hundred thousand dustraisers into our perimeter. They'd spent eight months getting a herd into position. We dug a moat to make the axbeaks give up the dustraiser idea. According to Texa-Bishi's videos, we were a step ahead of the game. "The axbeaks have enough sense to put off their war, so, in the end, they'll have the sense to stop it altogether," was the narrator's hopeful conclusion.

This wasn't likely if axbeaks were as inflexible as they were said to be. But how could they win? They weren't even in the Stone Age.

The Mullins' Planet skyhook was an automated elevator with two mass-balanced cars. It ran whenever a slinkship docked and her crew pushed the right buttons. For security reasons, "Bottomside" was a half-kilometer up from the ground, linked to a second structure and a second elevator. *This* part was staffed.

The ride down took three days, two-and-a-half by the local clock. Our sleeping passengers used the time to wake up. "God, am I hungry!" were Sharon's first words. She looked at me and my expression was full of import. "What?" she asked.

"I know the secret," I said. "Texa-Bishi's big cover-up. It's not slavery. Your kids aren't being mistreated. It's war."

"War?"

"With the axbeaks. *We're* not at war with *them,* but everybody knows they're jockeying to make a third massed attack. Texa-Bishi doesn't let this news get out to Earth. It would discourage new colonists. But there must be rumors, because the number of new colonists is down."

Sharon digested this news as she ate her rations and half of mine, making up for lost time. We descended. Mullins' Planet swelled in gib-

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bosity, bright and blue-green under the clouds. Our infotrons flashed welcomes from various pastors, priests, swamis, mobeds, mullahs, and rabbis. All were on the Texa-Bishi payroll. So were the mayor and her council.

For us travelers, the question was, where would we shower and sleep when we reached ground? We watched all these welcomes, hoping to hear an answer.

We reached Bottomside. The door opened, not to the unique vibrancies of Mullins' Planet, but to a lofty customs depot. We endured blood tests, injections, and sprays, shuffled to a new bank of elevators, and rode the rest of the way much more slowly, our ears going through pressure changes as they would on Earth, coming down from the heights of a 160-story skyscraper.

We stopped and emerged. This was the big moment. We filled our lungs and gazed around. Mullins' Planet was wet and green. The air was clean, the morning sunlight bright and lucid.

A bus waited. We carried our bags aboard. The driver handed out box lunches. "First a little tour, and then you'll check in at the immigration dormitory," he said.

"Will we see the orphanage?" Sharon articulated through a mouthful of sandwich.

"That's a longer tour," the driver said. "Maybe not today."

"Not today" described my sex life at the immigration dormitory when we reached it. Our two-person room had a telephone, and Sharon swooped to take control. I showered and napped through her phone calls. She rousted me for lunch. "We're scheduled for job tests this afternoon. Can you believe it? I just want to get to the orphanage. It's all I can think about!"

Sharon's job experience in Santa Fe qualified her as a *food service worker trainee.* With my Great Works education, fluency in two languages, import-export work in Trieste, skill with maps, and impeccable driving record, I was designated a *transportation specialist sub one.* My first day, this meant driving a truck. The second, I shifted pallets in a distribution center. On the third day, I was made a courier and given a bicycle.

Mullins' world had a thirty-hour rotation. People expected four meals a day. Sharon's job overlapped with other shifts, so she was involved with two meals plus cleanup. She put herself on the waiting list for work at the orphanage. During free time, she made calls to the orphanage administration. They had twin boys named Bladowsky, and here was Sharon Bladowsky pestering the staff to see them. The staff became protective. "We have to consider the interests of the children. Given the traumas of their past lives on Earth . . ."

Sharon didn't handle frustration well. She went to pieces. As days went by, she stole food from work. What with her binges and outbursts, I decided to move to my own dorm room. Sharon became past history.

Within weeks, I grew buff from bicycling. I delivered priority packages among the Zone's greenhouses and laboratories, and met lots of people.

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They were my introduction to the important business of Texa-Bishi on Mullins' Planet.

Sharon and I had run up big debts coming here. We couldn't leave until we'd worked off the cost of our passage. In Sharon's eyes, this made us slaves, but she had a negative outlook and I no longer paid attention to her. I was in line for a promotion, thanks to some bio-techs impressed with my new muscles. "You get double pay for work beyond the perimeter, guarding the crews who harvest plant specimens. If you don't mind carrying a gun you should try it out."

I trained at a gun range, passed the test, and got the job. This meant relocating from the dormitory. I'd spend five days of every work-week camping in the wilderness, with no salary deductions for room and board. At this rate I'd be debt-free within two years.

Of course, I could have sent a letter to Dad asking for escape-money. In an oblique way, I did that. I told him why I couldn't come home to Earth right away. He could have done the obvious thing, but I suppose we were playing a prideful game with each other.

Sharon didn't have my options. Her single triumph, which she told me about in a voicemail message, was that she'd wangled permission to spend one afternoon a week with her twin boys on the orphanage grounds. Her message ended with a mutter: "Someday I'll get them free from there. Someday we'll all be free."

In my new job, I rode the helicopter to wild harvest sites, part of a guard team with our own camaraderie: Greta, Zeke, Ilmir, Dale, Mukarjee, and now me to make it six. The scientists and technicians could have hung apart in their own group, but, surprisingly, this did not happen. Brains and brawn mixed as equals. Otherwise I might not have had the nerve to talk to Jane Thanet when I finally met her.

Jane was a vision even without makeup, despite sweat and bug-bites. She lived in the wild parts of Mullins' Planet, collecting things. Sticky, stretchy, oozy things.

She was Dick the Drunk's granddaughter. "My mom played with your dad when they were kids," she told me. "They ran around in the basement. She had a dog. Nero made all sorts of messes."

I nodded. "Dad told me about Nero. *Especially* about the messes."

Jane laughed, and we hit it off. I became interested in Jane's work. She talked about the new Texa-Bishi fabrics and fibers that her team was responsible for discovering. She talked about nature. The wildlife on Mullins' Planet was amazing. A creature called a "babushcow" defended itself by inflating a shawl around its neck. If an attacking axbeak broke the airbag, the stench drove her away. Jane amused me with animal stories and reminiscences, and I answered with bits from my own life.

My stories could have involved Sharon, but I was reluctant to diss my former girlfriend. It wasn't gallant. Better if Jane dragged it out of me. For example, at the end of a long day, with the Mullins' Planet sun setting in glory, while a voice out of the woods recited *Beowulf* in the original Old English.

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The voice was our local axbeak. She hung out of sight, though she registered bright and clear on my gun's infrared scope. She was dramatic in her passages about Grendel, possibly because she sympathized with monsters who preyed on humans. Her voice was as deep as an old Norse god's. "She likes *Beowulf,*" Jane said. "I wish we could get her on Homer's *Iliad,* but the axbeaks aren't convinced about the four-tone system extolled by recent scholars. They have misgivings."

"I can't tell when you're joking. My fear as a Great Works student is that here I am on a world where the wildlife demands that I master Aeschylus, or something by Sophocles."

Jane laughed and kissed me. Half the camp, male and female, were in love with her, so this was a triumph. Jane kept celibate outside the perimeter, and only frolicked when she had a weekend. With me, she broke the rules, and I felt blessed.

I fell for Jane completely. We weekended a few days later, and Sharon was the last thing on my mind. Then the phone rang.

It was Security Commander Gomez. I was to report to the moat on the east perimeter and tell him everything I knew about Sharon Bladowsky. Following that, I joined in the search.

Jane came along. She knew about the wilderness. She knew about axbeaks. She was there when I told Commander Gomez about Sharon's addictions and negative attitude.

"Reconcile yourself to the idea that she and the boys are dead," Commander Gomez said. "They grabbed a boat and rowed across the moat. She paid no attention to our warnings. The axbeaks keep pickets on the other side. They're known to be hostile."

"I'm surprised she did anything *physical,*" I said. The moat was wide, with a sheer climb on the far side.

"Her boys did the rowing," Gomez said. "Was she on drugs?"

"Nothing you get here," I said. "She'd relapsed as far as food was concerned. She might have got into drinking."

Gomez shook his head. The next twenty hours we did sweeps of the east bank, pushing out a few kilometers, looking for three "escaped slaves," or any remains still recognizable after the axbeaks were done with them.

We found nothing. We did not prolong the search.

Jane and I threw ourselves into work the next month. Our romance started again. I was a twice-vigilant guard, protecting the love of my life against a species capable of strange surprises. "It's possible they're *vastly* intelligent," Jane speculated one night by the campfire.

"Wouldn't a vastly intelligent enemy *use* humans, rather than obsessively trying to wipe us out?"

"They *do* use us—as a source for poetry."

"We're good for a lot of other things. We work. We don't get wet in a rainstorm because we put roofs over our heads. A vastly intelligent species might see the advantage of that."

Jane nodded. "I imagine debates, pro-humans versus con. Somewhere deep in the woods."

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Greta's phone beeped. It was Gomez. "*The copter's coming. You have ten minutes to pack, guns at the ready.*"

"What's up?"

"*No time for chat. That's how it is from now on. Move!*"

We had expensive gear, tents and work-tables, knives, sieves, microscopes, electrical generators, propane tanks and chemistry glassware. Ten minutes was totally unreasonable. Some stuff we abandoned. People stoked their anger during the helicopter ride, and made demands when we got to the Habitation Zone. We were told that this was how it was. No more overnight campouts. Drill evacuations at any moment. And always these impossible deadlines.

Rumors flew the next day when we went out to pick up the pieces. All the ambassador axbeaks had been evicted from the Habitation Zone. Reason? They'd hobnobbed with troublemakers, encouraging them to revolt. Another rumor was that they'd urged people to "escape" the Zone and head into the woods. Part of their subversive message was that war was imminent, so the mayor and Security Commander Gomez put us on top alert.

Back in the woods, our axbeak was miffed that we had changed our slack old ways. She took it personally. Her vocal performance was a cacophony of attitude, done in our own voices.

This lasted until she got bored, said a hundred doom-laden goodbyes—repetition being a way to drive humans nuts—and then ended with

"Can I see another's woe,
And not be in sorrow too.
Can I see another's grief,
And not seek for kind relief.
Can I see a falling tear,
And not feel my sorrows share,
Can a father see his child,
Weep, nor be with sorrow fill'd.
Can a mother sit and hear,
An infant groan an infant fear—
No, no never can it be.
Never never can it be."

By this third of nine verses, I recognized Sharon's poem. Her unique protection in case of axbeak attack! What did this mean? Was I being taunted?

It meant *something.* Perhaps Sharon was still alive. If so, where? Perfectly happy as a freed slave in the woods? Not Sharon! She enjoyed the good things of civilization: TV, comfy chaise-longues, fast food, and quicker liquor.

Suppose, on the other hand, that the axbeaks had killed Sharon? If her poem was in their repertoire, that meant the whole idea of "protective poetry" had to be abandoned.

This thought led me to call Security Commander Gomez. "I need to talk to you," I said, not trusting radio encryption with this message.

"See me in my office when your shift is over," Gomez said.

Jane came along as company. Gomez escorted both of us into his sanc-

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tum. I spoke my warning. Gomez had his own news. "The axbeaks have a small group of humans working for them. Some disappeared people like Sharon are alive, serving the axbeaks in their war effort."

"What can they do?" I asked. "Even with thirty thousand people and all our facilities in the Zone, Texa-Bishi's top weapons come from Earth. Come on! A handful of Sharon-wackos competing with Last-War technology?"

"Nevertheless, keep your eyes open in the wilderness. If humans are out there, they may regret the choice they've made. They'll want to come back and—well, I don't know. But keep open to all possibilities. No, don't go yet. There's another thing. You two, and everyone who goes outside the perimeter during the work-week; it's likely the axbeaks will choose their moment for mass hostilities while you're vulnerable out there. We want to reduce our excursions to a minimum. If you've got vacation time, take it now. If you want to switch to safer jobs inside the perimeter, that's fine too."

Jane had two weeks of accrued vacation time. I was newer in my job, so a couple of days later I was off again, toting my gun, protecting a handful of xenologists. We were picky about destinations: islands, peninsulas, clifftops, places hard to attack. We never went to the same spot twice, to keep the axbeaks from setting up an ambush.

All the axbeaks we encountered were hostile. They attacked. We shot them. I hadn't actually killed until this phase of things. The butchery made me miserable. No one liked it. The Zone's important people debated and adopted an even more restrictive excursion policy.

The Zone needed a few strategic materials that couldn't be found within our hundred square miles. My next foray was to a range of coastal hills where Texa-Bishi quarried limestone. All water in this region was underground except a few cenote-type pools. Rivers flowed in, disappeared, and emerged on the other side. Doubtless there were vast caves. One had collapsed, making a hollow where we thought we'd be safe from axbeak attack, unless they jumped suicidally from above.

We coptered in. Our hole was the size of a football field. The limestone was mostly rubble. We loaded and took off. Hostile ropes twanged tight above us. The pilot tried to evade, fouled our rotor blades, and we went down.

I remember the whirling plunge. I woke to consciousness. I rolled from the heat of the burning copter. I heard a voice from above: "That one's alive!" It didn't occur to me that axbeaks could out-human a human voice. Then one loomed before me.

I began my chanty:

"The sons of the Prophet are brave men and bold
And quite unaccustomed to fear,
But the bravest by far in the ranks of the Shah,
Was Abdul Abulbul Amir."

I had her attention. She studied me with one eye and then the other. Behind her, other axbeaks and humans slid down a pair of ropes. "We can camp here tonight."

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"That's a negatory," the axbeak said. She changed voices. "Continue."

I continued.

"If you wanted a man to encourage the van,
Or harass the foe from the rear,
Storm fort or redoubt, you had only to shout
For Abdul Abulbul Amir."

I was in shock, but she made me recite the whole damn song, all the way to the Muscovite maiden and her lonely vigil. Under the circumstances, this piece of doggerel wasn't one bit funny.

Nobody said axbeaks had a sense of humor. My captor heard me out, turned, and left. A human came up to check my wounds. He tore the shirt off a corpse to make bandages. "Welcome to freedom. Can't drag you, mate," he said. "This ground's too broken. Can you get up?"

He got me to my feet and we hobbled a distance from the burning copter. I was tied into a rope-seat and lifted up to the clifftop. Then I passed out. I woke to rain and darkness.

The rain washed off the toxic smoke of the helicopter, but still I smelled smoke, fresh from a fire at the mouth of a cave.

Here the tribe squatted. Meat lay butchered, rope was coiled and draped, and a pot bubbled with glue. Untooled hands had framed tables and rough beds. Fabrics flapped, and Sharon stepped forth. "Jeez, Pete. It *had* to be you."

"He's hot. I think he's infected," one of my captors said.

"There's no germ on Mullins' Planet adapted to infect humans," Sharon said.

"Then it's a regular old Earth germ," said the guy.

In my delirium, I was pretty sure that none of this was happening. A cave-Sharon wearing glue-glopped skins? She went over and stirred the glue-pot. "This is ready."

"We need light, or the work will be sloppy," one of the younger people complained.

"Soon as it gets light, the Zonees will send out another crew to investigate the loss of their helicopter." If this speaker hadn't loomed so high I wouldn't have known she was an axbeak. She made her point by stringing words the normal way instead of bleating Shakespeare or the *Bhagavad-Gita.*

"Well, then, we pull in. What are the winds like?"

"*To every thing, turn turn turn, there is a season, turn turn burn,*" the axbeak sang.

"We can keep the glue from congealing," said the younger person.

"I guess we have to," Sharon said. She felt my forehead. "Pete, are you trouble? Should we keep you alive? What *are* we going to do with you?"

"Use me to negotiate," I mumbled.

Sharon laughed. "You have no idea what's going on. Twice you ran out on me. God, you dumb fuck, I have pride too. You can't keep doing that!"

"*You* used *me.*"

"Ah, yes. *You. Are. So. Useable.* Let's keep him alive," Sharon announced to the others. "This is the hero we've been looking for."

* * *

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Here's where the lawyers went wrong at my trial. I was accused of changing sides. They said that my love for Sharon swung me over. I should have introduced one picture of Jane Thanet as evidence of how unlikely this was. The truth was, Sharon hated me like a woman scorned, and being dragged around the next three days of shifting camp did nothing to make "freedom" desirable. Nothing I ate stayed down. I say three days, but I had no idea except that it was an eternity. I had no one to complain to, because in my carry-bed I was one of a dozen burdens, and the other people envied my debilitating fever.

Axbeaks may not build roofs against the Mullins' Planet rains, but our leadership team knew exactly what weather was going to happen and when. Given the dearth of poetry about hot air balloons, they condescended to prose, and the Sharon tribe got to work with their fabrics and glue.

As this debased "free" gang built and hammered metal plates from the helicopter wreckage, axbeaks gathered by the score, stars of many an amazon epic, chanting metric boasts in their—well, it could have been a *language,* if whale-songs on Earth are language. If the pounding of presses on a factory floor is language. Wolf-howl and phone-chirp, radio static and wind whistling through loose windows. A pentatonic orchestra. And a thousand sounds besides.

Humankind was a huddled minority, tying ropes and lighting fires. The smells of our industry were barely tolerable. The two balloons began to fill as daylight gave the eastern sky a horizon. Stars vanished from the west. For once, I ate and kept my mush down. I was tumbled into one of the twin baskets. Four axbeaks got in and spread their arms like heroes in glory.

The other basket contained five. All nine accepted the eggs passed to them. Mine laid them on the basket floor, where I was an inconvenience.

The two balloons continued to swell and glow with the fires that burned below their straining mouths. They were connected by the slender ropes the humans had schlepped from their cave many days ago.

Another complaint from my trial was that I couldn't have been as sick as I claimed, because I had immunities and inoculations to fend off Earth diseases. Humans catch no Mullins' Planet diseases. But if my claims were a pose, why would I admit that as we lifted, and a cold wind carried our two balloons east, I began to feel better?

I could tell full well that we were blowing toward the base tower that reached up to the bottom of the Mullins' Planet skyhook. It was still early morning, but people in the Zone were afoot. As we ascended, they looked like ants, and then less than ants.

The axbeak aim was perfect. The ropes spanning our balloons hit the tower and we swung in and our altitude was just right. Here were the windows of Bottomside. Axbeak arms and hands, known for nothing but killing and theatrics, now threw hooks and grapples. They smashed glass. Their beaks sliced suspenders and the hot-air burners fell, crude cauldrons of helicoper-metal—even as the fires spluttered. The axbeaks had calculated things this closely! Not an extra kilo of charcoal or babushcow fart gas!

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Nine axbeaks cleared Bottomside in minutes. A slinkship was in. They wanted her to stay and not get warned. I was hauled from basket to bloody floor to a control closet. Here I committed my great crime of identifying what was obviously a fiber-optic cable to an axbeak amazon who already had it selected to tear apart. "But if the signal goes dead, won't the slinkship fly away?" I asked.

"I doubt it," said the blood-specked axbeak in perfect English.

I can hardly yet believe that she was right. Nor was the ingenuity of thirty thousand colonists sufficient to blink warnings to that dumb-and-deaf slinkship at the far end of the skyhook. They were just a bored crew up there. Apparently, none of them spent much time at the windows, and none of them was a radio hobbyist. But I was still a criminal, because why balloon up nine axbeaks *and one human* unless the human did something invaluable to the enemy cause?

Maybe the answer to that is, I was intended to identify the right cable. Maybe the answer is, my last name is Mullins, and the axbeaks knew that our name for their world was Mullins' Planet.

Knowing that the axbeaks meant to take one human, Sharon had insisted that it be me. She meant to get me into trouble. That's my theory. And the axbeaks kept me along because they wanted a witness. We invaders loaded ourselves into the elevator and pushed *UP*. Only two were left behind.

I never knew until the trial that Bottomside had its own emergency communication cable with High Orbit, independent of the one that got cut. I never knew that those two axbeaks contacted the slinkship crew, imitating a dozen human voices to perfection, and talking about "accidents" and repairs and delays. Meanwhile, they fought off Texa-Bishi's helicopters.

The big war was on. Around the perimeter, axbeaks attacked and were slaughtered. I knew nothing about any of this. I was in a skyhook elevator car, rising upward, reading maintenance manuals and making myself an instant expert in case our car's air pressure started to fail.

Seven axbeaks had nothing to do but protect their eggs, yet my accusers said that at this point I should have destroyed them. Yes, the idea occurred to me. Then I nearly fainted from fear of what seven angry axbeaks could do. After that, I kept distant from the eggs. This makes me a coward. Certainly, for those three days, I was cowed.

We reached the top. The axbeaks made their mad charge into the slinkship, and even when half the crew were killed, they used false voices to lull the unsuspecting other half. My part in this was to front a security camera, but I was not trusted to say anything. Instead my "voice" made proper requests and responses. That's how the axbeaks took two prisoners and got an undamaged slinkship.

We unmoored and flew into deep space. At least one of the axbeaks down on Bottomside was still alive, and used beak or claw or explosives or simple fire to uncouple the skyhook. I wasn't there to witness. No human was. All the humans of the Texa-Bishi Zone saw on that final day of the war was that the skyhook went swinging off, propagating shockwaves

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louder than megabooms of thunder. Bottomside pinwheeled into space, distorted by the drag of Mullins' Planet's atmosphere.

Thirty thousand Texa-Bishi employees were cut off. They'd get no more supplies from home, no more ammo for their automatics. A few hours later, Security Officer Gomez sent a delegation to ask the axbeaks for their peace terms.

Nobody knew that the axbeaks could even *have* peace terms. But the situation had suddenly become different, and axbeaks in triumph were unrecognizable. So I'm told. I can only say, about my own seven captors, that they composed grand brags about being masters of space.

Yeah, sure. One small trawler-class slinkship! And what could possibly happen when they reached Earth High Orbit? Would imitating a few voices get them past robo-security? It began to worry me how easily Sharon and I had coped with robo-security at the Albuquerque airport, but surely at EHO, things would be different.

I was part of a bloody joke, like that movie about Grand Fenwick invading America with a few pikemen in chain mail. Ha! The axbeaks didn't even have chain mail!

They had a slinkship though—and what damage might they do if they rammed Earth's skyhook at high speed? I worried about this, and then relaxed. They wouldn't have brought eggs if they meant to do a suicide attack.

Ask the people who wanted me to destroy those eggs what might have happened if I'd done so. With no eggs to protect and nothing to lose, the axbeaks would have been free to do anything! They could have rammed the skyhook, or the planet itself. Instead, they approached Earth's single guarded door.

What they met wasn't robo-security. They failed the password test. When our slinkship docked, we were met by weapons and closed airlocks. Seven axbeaks flung themselves across vacuum in desperation, and I saw the flashes that recoilless projectile-weapons make in the absence of air.

Seven bullets ended the axbeak invasion of Earth, although Internet legends tell other stories. The truth was, *even this* was a sufficient triumph. I was witness to the glorious fact that there *was* an axbeak invasion of Earth!

I was never consulted about the eggs. They were taken, as were we prisoners, each to a different interrogation. I was the only one charged with a crime. It was a bad year to be "a traitor to the human species," as Earth's news lackeys put it. We had just been defeated (temporarily) by an alien species with no weapons to speak of. There's a zero-sum economy of glory in the universe and we were humiliated while the axbeaks were exalted.

Nobody could buy me a defense. Even Dad didn't try. I was exiled to this cruel island, where the eggs I'd traveled with were hatched, and I was made to do the flunky work involved in raising semi-lethal children.

Meanwhile, those who were wise on Earth rose to prevail. They spoke to the "government" of Mullins' Planet. All this took time, but we had the

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enemy's hatched youth, and they had our thirty thousand, and here was a basis for negotiations.

I was all in favor. Jane was there and I was here. *Something* had to be done! And those terribly inflexible axbeaks weren't even difficult about the terms.

They'd won. They were as generous in victory as they'd been stubborn in ten years of defeat. And really—this will take a lifetime for everyone to believe—they *like* us. That was what the whole poetry thing was about. Think. People *like* cows, don't they? People *eat* cows, don't they? Let's just extrapolate a little.

It's called Mullins' Planet. They didn't even mind *that.* "Just send out the Mullins that we made king, and we'll accept him. Send him to rule. We in turn send our top poet to your prison island, now axbeak property and our kingdom on Earth."

"We'll have to rebuild the skyhook," our negotiator said slyly.

The axbeaks made few difficulties. They envisioned axbeak slinkships (oh, poof, yes—built by human hands) making random exploratory and then gastro-political annexations. I'm sure of this from what I know of young axbeaks.

And I'm sure that if they want to take all the risks, the human race will be glad to wait one step behind them. Let the poet-heroes go first. Let the farmers and civil engineers come afterward.

I said back at the beginning that my story wasn't about *me.* In truth, it's about the axbeaks. No one now doubts that axbeaks have language abilities, but it's bred into their bones that speech is a thing of joy, an art form, and only grudgingly a tool to be used, like a ceremonial jeweled sword that still draws blood, but only at risk to its beauty.

Maybe, too, my story is about Sharon. The axbeak victory should have been a triumph for those rebel humans, but, in fact, their fate is obscure.

Some people really do have Huck Finn's ancient urge to move into the woods, further and further yet, away from "interstellar civilization." Civilization made Sharon fat and irascible, irresponsible and unhappy. So, okay, she had a free choice. The problem is, do her twin sons have a free choice?

Today, I'm released from my prison. Soon, I'll be a far distant king, whatever *that* means. I hope that the reign of Petronius Rex means prosperity for Texa-Bishi, for the remainder of their modified lease. I hope that it means that Jane Thanet can do the work that she does so well, and relax at night to the sounds of *Beowulf,* without fear of axbeak hostility. And with me not far away.

But I don't know how to hope about the Sharon tribe, except to tempt those "free people" with all our wiles and drugs, and let the carnivore axbeaks worry about the rest. Yet somehow this seems wrong to me, and I'll hesitate as long as possible. Sometimes a king should be negligent.

Sharon, wherever you are in your wacko balloon-building freedom, I don't hate you. Isn't that odd? I don't hate you. Despite your own hate and despite Jane Thanet, it's probably closer to the other thing. ○

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RHINEMAIDENS

Larry Niven

Larry Niven and his wife Marilyn live with their cat and around twenty koi in Chatsworth, California. This renowned author's most recent books include *Scatterbrain,* a retrospective anthology, and *Ringworld's Children.* Both books were published by Tor. Upcoming works include *Burning Tower,* with Jerry Pournelle (Pocket); *Harlequin's Moon,* with Brenda Cooper (Tor), and *The Draco Tavern,* a collection of twenty-one ultrashort stories that will also be published by Tor. Step into his latest tale, for a brief sampling of the sirens' songs.

"Hello, Sailor! How about a swimming lesson?"

"Sorry, ladies, I can't hold my breath that long." Veryon grinned at a pair of lovelies looking up out of the canal. He stepped close enough to see their smooth, fishy tails. They were mers, both of them.

"You don't need coins," one said. She had pale skin and long, soft silver tresses, already dry. Her face was a narrow triangle; her teeth were all pointed. "What have you got?"

She meant barter. Veryon swung his pack off his back and opened it.

He had come to Minterl late on market day. Both shores of the city's main canal were lined for many paces with little heaps of sponges and shells and the cheaper treasures found in sunken ships: silver cups and spoons, all black with tarnish; bronze cookware and fittings for sails. Everything but fish. Merfolk merchants kept their fish underwater and alive, and sold them from nets woven from seaweed.

Townsfolk brought goods of copper and bronze, red meat, fruit, and pots of cooked vegetables. The mers' purchases were added to the heaps. Most of the walking folk had gone home, and the mers were going too.

It didn't matter. There wasn't anything to trade in Veryon's pack. He was just playing. "Flint knife to pretend you're my wife?"

"We can shape those ourselves. Bronze? Iron?"

"Sorry."

The other woman's hair was night-black, bound up in a long braid. She said, "Talisman? With a talisman I could grow legs for awhile."

"Where's the fun in that? You'd be just like girls of the land."

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"Might be nice. I've never walked. My mother tells that we used to do that all the time."

"The magic goes away," Veryon agreed.

"What do you say?"

Veryon was surprised. This was something everyone knew. "The manna, the essence that makes magic work, it gets used up. Like copper in a mine, you take the ore and there is no more."

Blackhair laughed. "What would we know of mines?"

Veryon said, "I'm a stranger in Minterl. I'm looking for work as a smith, or maybe an inn to sing in."

The women looked at each other. "You're in luck," said Silverhair. "The smithy isn't far. You can walk along the canal."

"Or we could carry you," Darkhair suggested.

"I'll walk."

Silverhair began to collect their gear. Darkhair said, "This way," and glided ahead of him, arms at her side as she undulated through the water, very pleasant to watch.

A full moon was not long risen. The canals of Minterl gleamed, a rectilinear silver spiderweb running through low-growing grain and vines. Darkhair led him south to the river, against a growing current.

The river expanded as it joined the ocean. Veryon looked across at a long, rocky island. Darkhair pointed with a long, lovely arm. "There."

"What kind of smithy is this? I don't see a bridge."

"No bridge. It's ours. Before any of us were born—you'd be about a quarter century?"

"Twenty-six."

"—Our people thought they could smelt their own metal. We built this place with human help and a bit of magic. We wanted to learn how to use fire. Alas, fire dries our skin and our throats, and burns us if we're careless, and cutting wood and burning it to charcoal and pounding red hot metal all day is very hard work. Our folk had to give it up."

"So now you want human help? But how do I get there?"

"Can't you swim? It doesn't matter. I can tow you, nice and smooth, with your nose out of the water."

Veryon could swim, but he didn't say so. He was having second thoughts.

What he knew of mers came from rumor and stories.

There were ocean currents that carried manna. Mers followed the currents, like any creature with a magical metabolism. Where manna ran low, mers became seagoing air breathers, streamlined and padded with fat against the cold, though giving live birth and suckling their young, like humans. Where manna ran higher, mers could appear as men and women with finny tails and hands to grasp tools. Magic had been dwindling for thousands of years, and these days it was a rare thing for mers to walk on land.

They came in a variety of sizes. Some were the length of an arm; some the size of hills. At a guess, these human-sized mers came because they could fit into the rivers and canals.

The treasures of the sea were theirs: not just drowned ships, but drowned lands. Parts of Atlantis lay submerged; mers played among the

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drowned houses. What bothered Veryon was the rumor that sometimes they drowned a sailor, or caused a ship to sink.

While he hesitated, Darkhair began to sing.

Veryon joined in. The tune seemed half familiar. He could feel the tug of a summoning spell, weakened in these lands of low manna, and singing the song himself robbed it of its power. He didn't know the words, but Veryon had a gift for languages. He sang, and got it wrong, and Darkhair laughed and repeated the phrases over until he had it by heart.

By then the sky was fully dark and the moon was well up. Darkhair said, "You have no place to sleep. And have you eaten?"

"No." His hunger leapt like a wolf.

"My name is Sinjern," she said.

"I'm Veryon."

He lowered himself into the water. The mermaid turned him on his back, hand under his chin, his cheek against her breast, and pulled him toward the island. It was pleasant, not cold at all once he was in the water, though he had to squint against the moonlight.

He asked, "How's the fishing around here?"

Sinjern took him seriously. "Fish can be found anywhere."

"I've been in other cities. In most places, men do their own fishing."

She snorted. "From boats! They wouldn't do that if they didn't have to. In too many places, mers lose human shape. We can't help it. Nostrils on top of our heads, arms changed to stubby little fins—"

"Too little manna in the ocean currents," Veryon suggested.

"It may be. We swim better, but how can we trade like that? How can we carry anything, or make anything? So men learn to take fish for themselves. But in Minterl we can still change.

"Mers are nomads, Veryon, like you. Fixed places are an aberration to us. We barter fish and shells and anything found in sunken ships, for iron and copper tools. Men and mers trade services sometimes. We have weather magic. You work with fire."

An inlet ran into a cave with a sandy bottom. Veryon climbed out and shook some of the water off. "What will you trade with me?" he asked.

"We'll work something out. If you'll start a fire, I'll bring you fish to broil."

The smithy was crude: an anvil and a hearth and some bronze tools. Veryon looked it over. The last occupant had left a heap of charcoal and some branches for kindling, and flint. People with legs had worked this place, but they must have been mers: the only access was by sea.

Veryon started a fire. Sinjern dove, and presently returned with a thrashing yellowtail, which Veryon gutted using his flint knife.

He asked, "What did your people make with these things?"

"We made some spear points. We tried to make a head of the king, but it wasn't good enough."

The fire warmed him and dried him. Broiling fish scented the air.

Silverhair was back. She lifted a burden out of the water. Hammered bronze spear points in a seaweed net. "We made these. Can you do better?"

"They're not very good. I'll have to smelt them again. I'll make some molds."

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"This?"

A lodestone. "Where did you get this?"

"From a sunken ship. It's iron."

"It's a tool for finding your way at sea. You could sell it and *buy* spear points."

The women looked at each other. Veryon asked, "Do you think you can learn to copy what I do? Feel free to watch. Fire is still too hot for your kind. Fire is ours."

"All right. Here, we have this too." Silverhair lifted two double handfuls of gold coins out of the water, enough to make Veryon stare. "I am Leyria. What can you make for us? What do you need? Can you make us blades?"

Gold made a difference.

In the morning they towed him across. In Minterl Veryon bought a boat and oars. He bought blankets, cookware, food, clothing, and an axe, to ferry over to the island. He bought a lute to replace an instrument he'd sold in Oldenholm.

The merchants of Minterl seemed used to dealing with outlanders. A woman who sold root vegetables tried to warn him. "This is sunken gold, isn't it? You're dealing with mers."

"Yes."

"Rumor says that not all sunken ships meet natural disasters."

"How do you mean?"

"Deep water belongs to the mers. In the water they can do anything they want. If you swim with them, they can drown you."

"I'll be careful," Veryon said. "Do you know this?"

She lifted the lodestone by its slender chain and let it swing. "It doesn't point right any more. But, see this? That's the mark of Salass Port. A ship of theirs sank out there on the reefs, last year in a storm. Sometimes during a storm, we hear singing."

The boat wouldn't enter the cave. He pulled it high on a sand beach and ferried his gear to the smithy.

He'd been long without a woman, and the farm woman's warning worked in his mind. Perhaps it was danger calling to him. At the next dawn he swam with the mermaids.

This was different. Leyria and Sinjern swam round and round him, a whirlpool of womanflesh. Then dark-haired Sinjern pulled him against her and into her, tail flapping, while silver-haired Leyria took charge of keeping his chin above the water. They took turns. Their flesh was chill, with a core of wonderful heat. They found him irresistibly funny.

He sang with them. Theirs were songs of summoning. One song summoned a storm: they huddled inside the cave until it passed. He taught them some of his own songs, harmless stuff, mere entertainment. The three and Veryon's lute sang well together.

And he worked.

Trees grew on the island, above the sand beaches. He chopped them for wood, and set logs smoldering under cover, to make charcoal.

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The metal he worked had to come out of the sea. The women brought it faster than he could use it. They carried up a few nodules of raw ore from the sea bed, but it was easier to work metal already refined. He had cook pots engraved with the names of ships, and a big bronze anchor (from *Acheron,* the engraving said) set against a wall waiting for something ambitious. Some of the artifacts were valuable; he set them aside to sell in town.

He explored the island. There were sand beaches. He made forms from sand to shape molten metal.

He had been long without human companionship. On the fourth day, meaning to row across to town, he found that his oars were gone. He used his axe to shape a branch and rowed across that way.

He spent time in a bathhouse. It was good to be clean. He found an inn, the Lost Ring, where he dined and drank and sang. He showed a flagon of beaten gold. A man recognized it, claiming that it came from *Acheron*, a ship built in Minterl and crewed by Minterl men, that disappeared at sea.

He slept at the inn. He returned to his forge the next morning, carrying rope, grain and fruit and vegetables, a barrel of wine and other forgotten things. He resumed work on a sword.

The women did not come to him.

When he looked a few days later, his boat was gone from the strand.

Another day passed before Sinjern appeared. He told her, "The boat is mine. Where is it?"

"The boat may be yours," she said, "But you are ours."

"Ah." That was a chilling thought.

"What have you done for us?"

"I've made a sword." He gestured behind him. He'd fashioned prongs and set them high in the rock wall to hold the sword. It was the best he'd ever done: not quite a masterpiece yet, not at his age.

Sinjern said, "Oh, wonderful! The king will love it. Give it to me."

"We can certainly discuss that."

She disappeared with a splash that showered him with water.

He thought it over.

Nobody in Minterl would come looking for him. Could he summon rescue? He might set up a beacon of some kind, on high ground where mers couldn't reach.

He scrawled HELP on his largest blanket and set it flapping from branches on the highest tree he hadn't yet cut down. It couldn't be seen from either shore, but perhaps from a passing boat . . .

It didn't take him long to search the island. The boat wasn't to be found. At a guess, it was underwater. Sinjern and Leyria could bring it up for him, if they chose.

They knew he could swim. They might not know he could cross the channel to Minterl, though he was sure he could.

He tried it anyway, at dawn, eight days after he'd arrived. The market would just be gearing up. He'd find help there.

Presently he realized that finny shapes were pacing him.

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They let him almost reach the canal before they turned him and pulled him back to the smithy. They used him as a lover before they let him crawl ashore, gasping, chilled, and worn out.

The hearthfire warmed him. He was tempted to drink himself into a stupor. The barrel of wine would more than do the job, and it was mostly untouched.

Instead, he thought.

He set up camp above a sand beach, under a lean-to. Over the next day he brought up everything he wanted. He'd bought no meat, counting on seafood brought by mers, but there was grain and root vegetables. He wouldn't starve soon. Now he waited.

The merwomen must have found Veryon missing and the smithy nearly stripped. By the time they found his camp they were enraged. He waved at them, laughing, from high up on shore. He was holding the big golden flagon.

"Now let's talk," he called.

"Give us the sword!" Sinjern cried.

"We can work something out. Talk to me."

"Where did you get wine? From the land folk, of course," Leyria said. "Why have you been hoarding it?"

"You're right. Drink with me." He poured wine into the flagon, supporting the barrel awkwardly, then rolled the barrel down to them over the sand, prudently staying out of reach. "Sing with me."

"The sword!"

"Give me the boat. I'll give you the sword." Near the island's rocky crest, he set the flagon down with exaggerated care. He found the sword, tried a complicated pass and dropped it. "Ooop."

The women spoke softly to each other. Then they dove.

Veryon sipped carefully from his cup. Now, this was a pretty problem. Should he go down after the barrel? The waves were lapping at it, shifting it about. If Sinjern and Leyria were lurking just under the surface, they'd pull him in, and whether they'd drown him was something he couldn't guess. He'd felt their strength.

But if he didn't go after the barrel, would they believe he was drunk?

If he were drunk, Veryon knew he'd go after the barrel. He sat and thought about it.

Two heads popped up, dark and silver. "Here," said Leyria, and they lifted the boat until he could just see its black bottom shining. It was upside down. "Come get it." They pushed it almost above the waves.

He walked down to the water. Stooped, and had the rim, and Leyria lunged for his hand. He jumped back out of reach, laughing wildly. She backed away, smiling, and he reached again. Pulled the boat by its rudder and walked backward, pulling the craft beyond the waves.

This close to the sea, the river had a bit of a tide. It was high tide now; the boat would stay until he needed it.

"Sword!" Leyria called.

Veryon walked uphill, picked up the sword, and hurled it spinning

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down into the waves. Sinjern snatched it up. They inspected it. "Good," said Sinjern, and Leyria said, "Swim with us."

"I don't suppose you'd give me my oars?"

Leyria cursed.

Veryon drank, cup held high, head tilted back. He began to sing one of the songs he'd taught them. With some effort he turned the boat over. The women watched while he packed it. Gold coins: not much left, but some. Gold and bronze treasures from sunken ships. Narrow-necked pots. His pack held his lute and axe and some blankets. Every so often he stopped to mime drinking from the empty flagon. A mirror of silver turned black turned silver again: he'd poured it himself. A mask he'd made, also of silver, of Sinjern's narrow triangular face. He held that up and asked, "How's this?"

"Good," Sinjern said grudgingly. "Can you do the King?"

"He's never seen the King!"

Veryon sang. The ladies began to sing too. Leyria broke off to drink from the barrel. She called, "Do you want more?"

Veryon upended his flagon. "Aye, I'm empty. But I'm afraid of you, you know. They say that mers drown sailors, and you've shown me stuff from sunken ships."

Sinjern protested. "We've never sunk a ship or drowned a man."

"What happened to *Acheron*?"

A long moment passed. Then Sinjern said, "That was the King. *Acheron* was trading with the Mu people, giving them weapons."

"You fight among yourselves?"

"Sometimes. Where currents are right, where we can keep our shapes, that can be a place worth fighting over. That ship, it was carrying spears. We sang to lure the sailors onto the rocks."

"I don't like politics," Veryon said.

Sinjern drank, then Leyria. They had to hold the barrel steady against the waves. Veryon asked, "Sea sirens of mine, are you used to wine?"

"Walker man, what are you thinking! How could mers get used to drinking? Can't keep it underwater, can we? And drinking at market gets you cheated," Sinjern said, and drank. "S'good, though."

"Sometimes there's wine in a sunk ship. Then we and walkers can have a party," Leyria said, "if there's enough. Come on down, Veryon! Have some."

Veryon shook his head, and began a song of a hunter lost in the woods. They joined him, and he picked up the lute and played along. The women began a song of their own.

Veryon played a jangle of dischord. "Not that! You'll make a storm!" He began to sing the first song he'd learned, the song that would summon sailors. He added the lute. The women joined in. He felt the pull, and resisted.

They stopped for a moment to take turns drinking from the barrel. Veryon went on singing. Now both merwomen began crawling up the sand, flopping and rolling drunkenly.

The only defense against the song was to sing along. They'd stopped singing, and now they were caught. He danced backward toward the

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rocky crest, summoning them. They were in arm's reach before he stopped singing.

Sinjern looked about her and laughed. Leyria flipped and started to wriggle downslope.

"Ah ah," Veryon said. He jogged down after Leyria carrying a coil of rope. He tied rope to her tail, then looped it around a boulder, then tied Sinjern. "Don't untie it," he said.

"Hang yourself!" Sinjern snarled.

"Look." He lifted into view a spear, bronze head and bronze haft. His other hand held an oar he'd carved, much better than the first. "Don't touch the rope until I'm gone."

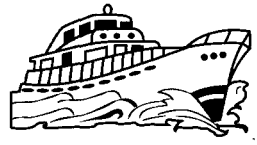
Sinjern cried, "Why do you need to do this to us?"

"You could turn the boat over. Now I think I can row across before you get down to the water. Am I being unreasonable? You live and I live."

The women said nothing.

"Don't go back to Minterl." Veryon went down to the boat. He held up gold and bronze objects they'd given him from the sea. "From *Albatross*, and *Merchant's Pride*, and *Sea Hawk*. I didn't melt these. I'm going to show these around. I don't know that you sang those ships onto the reefs, but it's a reasonable guess. You sank *Acheron*."

He dropped his loot into the boat, and pushed. Upslope, both women were cursing as they worked on knots. Veryon pushed the boat into the waves and scrambled aboard. The women were loose and wriggling toward shore when Veryon began to paddle. ○



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CITY OF REASON

Matthew Jarpe

Matthew Jarpe lives with his wife, Michelle Morris, and their son, Samuel, in Quincy, Massachusetts, the birthplace of two U.S. presidents and Dunkin' Donuts. His day job is doing biochemistry experiments in the drug discovery group at a Cambridge pharmaceutical company called Biogen Idec. He also enjoys making his own beer, which, he says, is another kind of biochemistry experiment aimed at drug discovery. Mr. Jarpe's latest story treats us to a tale of multiple layers of betrayal in the Asteroid Belt.

Homesteaders made for easy pickings. For one thing, they were hell and gone outside the orbit of Neptune, the last crumb of civilization before the big dark. For another, they all had philosophies. You didn't up and leave mainstream humanity unless you had some ideas that just wouldn't work inside someone else's system. And so the homesteaders moved out and set up on trans-Neptunian objects, balls of dirty ice, and made a go at Utopia. I've never heard of a philosophy that didn't cripple a society from defending itself properly. So most of the homesteads were weak.

Easy pickings, but slim. Their equipment wasn't the best. They didn't have loads of energy or raw materials, or biodiversity, or any of the stuff that makes a pirate happy to have risked his life to get. In fact, the Kuiper belt had gotten a reputation as a kind of pirate's farm system. You honed your skills out where the sun was dim, and when you had the moves and the weapons, you drifted down into the gravity well and you went major league.

So what was I doing out among the snowballs? Well, that's the thing. I'm not a pirate anymore. I've gone legit. Nowadays, when I reduce a manned spacecraft to a blob of alloy with a crispy center, I'm on the side of the angels. I'm a Damager, license right there on my forward bulkhead next to the picture of my sainted mother.

I get my information from the eye in the sky. The Coordinator Group maintains three space stations in solar polar orbits that are perpendicu-

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lar to the ecliptic. Between those SoPo stations and the spy bots salt-and-peppered around the system, those bastards see everything. Needless to say, the rise of the Coordinator Group was what persuaded me and others like me to go legit. Best play for the winning team.

So there I am, cooling my heels and everything else besides out past the orbit of Neptune, when I get a blip on my radar. Something is out there, and it isn't supposed to be, and the Coordinators don't know about it, and that's the first time that's happened to me.

It's too late for me to go all stealthy. I've had my radar and transponder shouting out for all to hear, so I've already given up my shit. I figured I might as well play Damager, so I flipped on the horn and spoke in Belligerent Asshole voice.

"This is the licensed Damager *One in the Hand* addressing the unidentified object at 183.24.46 incline -16 out 67 heading 004.58.07. Please reactivate transponder and identify." At the same time, I sent a burst of machine code that would give the same message, minus the belligerent tone, to the automated systems of the ship.

And how did I know it was a ship and not some piece of rock wandering off its accustomed orbit? After all, the only thing I had to go on was a little radar blip. It could be anything. Well, call it a gut feeling if you want to. A few minutes of data-gathering and my ship's targeting computer confirmed my suspicions. The thing was hollow and rotating, and about thirty thousand klicks back, it had shed a wisp of chemical rocket exhaust during a course-correcting burn.

So I was right. Hell, I ought to be. I've survived out here longer than most people have been alive, and most of that time was spent hunting ships. I can smell a can of meat across a thousand kilometers of void.

But there was no answer from the unidentified vessel. Nobody ignores a Damager. I laid in a course and burned hard for the cheeky bastard. I overtook easily in just a few hours. He didn't even try to run. That's when I got my first look at the ship.

Ship. I'm being charitable. It was made of rock and ice, and only a miracle gave it enough balance to burn the engines without wobble. This thing wouldn't last ten minutes inside the orbit of Mars. Sol would cook off the ice and leave nothing holding it together. It was no wonder the Coordinators hadn't pegged it. It looked like just another fucking rock.

"In case you haven't got any sensors, my friend, I'll tell you that I've matched vectors two thousand meters from your . . . well, I guess we'll call it a vessel. Now, I already told you I'm a Damager, but just in case you've been living under a rock, or inside one, for a long time, I'll tell you what that means. That means I've got a weapon trained on you that will take your whole outfit down to plasma in just a couple of seconds. Okay, you're probably asking yourself about now what you have to do to avoid the fate I've just described. You can tell me who you are for starters, and we'll go from there."

I gave it a few minutes with my message repeating on all frequencies in a couple dozen common languages and I got my reply. "Uh, don't shoot, mister. I'm Jesse Marslarsen. I'm out of the High Fantastic Empire of Trans-Emotional Excellence."

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I looked that one up. Sixty-three people in a cave hollowed out of an ice ball about two hundred million clicks from here. Pretty god-damned Fantastic. "Good job, Jesse. I'm about 50 percent less likely to kill you now that you've started talking. What's the name and registration number of your vehicle there?"

"I don't . . . have one. It's homemade."

"I kind of figured. So you never registered this thing with the Coordinator Group?"

"We can't afford the fee," the voice said. "We don't produce anything to trade, you know."

"I've got that information on my screen, yeah. Only it's dangerous to be out here without the Coordinators knowing what you're about. Guy like me is likely to shoot first and explain the situation to the oversight board later. They usually don't care much. Tell you what, Jesse Marslarsen. Let's give your ship a name. I'm going to call it *JAFR*."

"What is that, a random code?"

"No," I said. I was about to tell him what it stood for, then I thought better of it. "Yes, that's what it is." Jesse didn't sound like he had much of a sense of humor there. "Now we're going to do pretty much what the Coordinators do when they register a flight. I'm going to ask what your business is, where you're going and why, and then I'm going to find out what you've got on board. The whole purpose is so we can let the people at your destination know that you're no danger and they're safe to let you dock. If they're willing to pay for that information, of course."

"Well, I guess there isn't much I can do to stop you," Jesse said. "I'm willing to tell you the whole story and let you onboard to inspect, but you're not going to give any assurances to the people I'm on my way to see."

"Why is that, Jesse?"

"Because I'm going to kill them."

The probes I brought with me to the *JAFR* confirmed what Jesse had told me. He was transporting a rather hefty thermonuclear device buried in the rock and ice that was his ship. He had no other ordnance, no weapons of any kind. Just one honking great bomb, a standard ion drive, and a rather meager life-support bubble. I was rather impressed that they had gone to the trouble to outfit this crummy little ship with a lifeboat and a distress radio. Perhaps a futile gesture in this sparsely populated region, but you had to give them points for thinking ahead. The rest of the ship was barely adequate. It would have been cramped space for one human, but there were two people in there. Two young people.

I entered the ship through a short tunnel that led to an airlock. They let me in without protest or threat, but I kept my battle armor on anyway. Not just to be safe, but because talking to the blank metal faceplate and the array of sensors made people nervous. I like the answers I get from nervous people.

Jesse Marslarsen was just a kid, good dark-haired thin-faced Martian stock. The High Fantastic Empire was working on emotions, according to their published manifesto. They were using some genetic modifications

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and some hardware implants to . . . I don't know, conquer emotions or get in touch with them or something like that. Like most of these homesteader manifestos, it wasn't the clearest thing to read. They had reported no success to the rest of the solar system, but best of luck to them anyway. The battle armor trick was working on Jesse. I had thought he was high-strung talking to him on the radio, but in person he seemed ready to snap.

His companion was not of the High Fantastic Empire but from a neighboring colony. She was a darling little thing of sixteen Earth years, strawberry blond hair and green eyes, scattering of freckles across her nose. But looks were, as is so often the case in this day and age, deceiving. That cute little American cheerleader's body was just a walking feeder culture for sophont silk.

I'd seen people boost their brainpower with thread lots of times. I'll bet there isn't anyone on Luna who doesn't have a bit of silk in the old gray matter. It was a popular implant, not one of the ones I was using, but it had its adherents. It was nice to see that even this trend had been taken to its extreme out in the homesteads. I don't believe that there was anything left, mentally, of the young woman who had been called Shaunasie MacTaggert. When I spoke to her, found out who she was and where she was from, it was clear to me that I was talking to the silk.

She was from an enclave that called itself A Better Way. They didn't have much on file, and the name certainly didn't give me much to go on. If their whole philosophy was an unhealthy indulgence in mental enhancements, that made them dangerous enough. But what interested me right then was not why her colony had created such a loathsome creature, but why they had put it on this ship with this kid and this bomb.

"Jesse, Shaunasie, thanks for inviting me in here. I like it when people make my job easier. I'll be sure to remember that in my report. Now, do you mind telling me what you're up to? Looks like your trajectory is taking you to someplace called the City of Reason in about twenty-three days. What's your beef with these guys?"

"We're making a retaliatory strike against them," Jesse said. "They've repeatedly attacked us over the past two years."

"They've attacked both your home colonies?"

"No, they've only attacked the High Fantastic Empire so far, but everyone else in this region is at risk. A Better Way is just orbiting by beneath us, and they've been advising us, first on how to deal with the attacks, and now they're helping us to bring the fight to them. Shaunasie is here to do the strategic analysis of the base we're taking out, make sure the bomb is planted in the right place to do maximum damage. The High Fantastic Empire doesn't have any expertise in the arts of war."

"And A Better Way does?"

"Some of their people had done military service before coming out here."

"But not Shaunasie, certainly?"

"She's been trained by people with experience," Jesse said, glancing at the girl across the habitat bubble. "She can handle the job."

I turned to Shaunasie. "Is this a suicide mission?" At the same time I

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asked the question in standard Chinglish, I aimed a communication laser at the teardrop lens on her left cheek. I sent out some priority override codes to see what her implants would give up to a licensed Damager. Turned out: nothing. She was locked to me. As a Damager. But I already told you that I haven't been a Damager forever. Before joining up with the Coordinator Group, I was a criminal. That can come in handy, like it did now.

"Not necessarily," Shaunasie said. "We're prepared, if it comes to that." She glanced at Jessie and he looked back at her with admiration and pride.

"So you're willing to throw your life away just to help your neighbors?"

"I'm not throwing my life away. It's true, this isn't our fight. We'll be orbiting out of here in another ten years or so. But we can't let naked aggression like this go unanswered. Our council of elders was willing to risk my life to help these people." I had to hand it to the software that was running her. She was pretty good. I began to wonder whether her comrade-in-arms had any idea that she was a posthuman. My guess was no.

"Look, guys," I told them, "I have to tell you, it isn't my job to get mixed up in local politics. All I'm here to do is gather the information so that the Coordinator Group can put it on the market. If the City of Reason wants to pay our fee, they will find out everything that I know about you. You've been most helpful and for that I am grateful, but, and I'm being brutally honest here, if they buy what we're selling, the City of Reason is going to blow your ship into something that makes smithereens look chunky."

"They're not going to buy your information."

The young woman was probably right. The City of Reason was weird even by homesteader standards. They had never published a manifesto, had never registered themselves to receive immigrants, and had never once paid any sort of fee to the Coordinators. Now, true, nobody ever read the manifestos, nobody ever emigrated to the homesteads once they were set up, and when you didn't have trade, you usually couldn't make the Coordinators' fees. But at least most of the homesteaders acted like they were still part of the human race, if only a distant cousin twice removed. The City of Reason had left Titan, grabbed a ball of dirty ice at the edge of the system, and had kept to themselves ever since.

"What exactly did the City of Reason *do* to make you want to drop a bomb on them?" I asked Jesse.

"They sent us Trojan horse data-packets that shut down our physical plant. We almost died."

"Uh-huh. And how do you know these data packets came from the City of Reason?"

"Our friends helped us trace the source," Jesse said, nodding at Shaunasie.

I shook my head inside the helmet. You'd think these crazies could get along with one another, being united against the rest of us, but it never seems to work out that way.

Shaunasie tossed her short hair in a perfect imitation of a defiant gesture. "These people have a right to defend themselves."

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"Like I said before, it ain't my business to get mixed up in all this."

I pulled myself back to the airlock that would get me outside the cramped living quarters. I toyed briefly with the idea of telling Jesse what Shaunasie really was. They had spent one hundred fifty-two days together so far, and had another twenty-three to go before they completed their mission. Assuming they managed to drop their bomb and get away alive, they would have a hell of a long trip back even using the fastest transfer orbit.

Jesse was about eighteen Earth years old. Even if the High Fantastic Empire had some kind of sexual hang-up, which I'm pretty sure they didn't, he would have to be crawling the walls trying to figure out a way to get at that tight little body of hers. Trans-emotional excellence notwithstanding. If he knew she was just software running on organic fibrils interspersed throughout her nervous system, he might lose interest. It would turn the rest of the trip from exquisite torture to something more like the heebie-jeebies.

In the end, I decided against it. I was eighteen once. I know what I would have said if some old fart told me to stop wasting my time with my current love interest. I waved goodbye with a gloved hand, and left through the airlock.

As I took the sled back to my ship, I was doing a bit of data-mining on the info I had teased out of the little tease on the *JAFR*. Nothing I had downloaded would be admissible in most courts, seeing as how I had stolen it. But the Coordinator Group was not a court. They didn't care where their information came from. They were simply brokers. They found things out, they sold that information, they stayed in business, and they helped the vastly complex process of interplanetary trade happen. Nobody got hurt.

They ordinarily wouldn't pay much for the inside scoop on a homestead, but I had a feeling that A Better Way was up to something the rest of the solar system would find distasteful at best, dangerous at worst. Human enhancement was a touchy issue. Nobody was ready to come out against any form of improvement, whether it was genetic manipulation of the unborn or hardware or organic implants in adults. The practice was just too pervasive. But all the same, everyone wanted to know what everyone else was up to. How smart, how fast, and how much of the natural type human mind was still intact? I didn't know whether the interest was self-defense or keeping up with the competition. Maybe a bit of both.

The data dump I got from Miss MacTaggart gave me a good idea of what A Better Way was up to. They had a few thousand members, pretty thriving community for the Kuiper Belt. The elders were well-augmented with hardware implants. Younger generations had some bold genetic modifications, all mental. They had a few dozen brain-jacked kids still learning how to direct-link with the three artificial intelligences that ran the physical plant.

They were growing their own sophont silk. In the quantities they were using the stuff, I wasn't surprised. Millions of Outer System Currency Units couldn't buy the crop of thread that went into each baby. Yeah,

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that's right, they were threading the babies. As if drilling them for brain-jacks wasn't enough.

So, it was a creepy setup. So, they were doing nasty things to children. I know that's all bad stuff, I'm no moral cripple. But I also knew that it wasn't moral outrage that would attract the high bidders. No, what they'd want to know was: what were the capabilities of this colony? What edge did their enhanced mental powers give them? And what did they plan to *do* with that power?

I left it to the Coordinator Group to figure that all out. They had the background on the colony's founders, and the data on what sort of mind you could expect to result from extreme abuse of sophont silk. I sent off my data with my usual contract to Coordinator HQ on Mercury. My job here was done.

Here's the thing about orbits. When you leave someone behind, you still share the same orbit around the Sun until you do a burn. To save fuel, you coast in a bit or out a bit and speed up or slow down, and you gradually drift apart. The whole setup is hell on dramatic exits. You're still looking at the people you walked out on for days afterward.

I still had the ugly lump that was *JAFR* on my radar map when the call came in from my ombudsman in the Coordinator Group. No two-way conversations out here, of course. I was fifteen light hours away from the headquarters on Mercury. But then again, no conversation with Seymour Gladstone was two-way, even when he was in the same room.

"Nice report, cowboy," he said without preamble. "Where do you find these people? I mean, a little sophont silk here and there is all well and good, but eeeeewww! Anyway, we had our top analyst dig through your data-dump and all the other dirt we've got on these Better Way people. Turns out they come from Titan, just like those poor schmucks out at City of Reason. But wait, it gets better!" He leered.

"City of Reason was founded by a mathematician named Right Finegold. Chair of the Institute for Introspection in the Graduate School of Abstract Sciences in the College of Higher Thought of Titan University." He said this last in a sing-song voice while reading off a data-pad. He tossed the pad on his desk and leaned into the camera for a conspiratorial whisper that was completely unnecessary and very like Seymour. "There was a Scandal. It had all the ingredients of a classic: sex, money, and cognitive enhancements. Finegold's Institute was collaborating with the Experimental Cognition Department, writing the software that would run on enhanced human minds, and things went wrong."

I paused the playback, made myself a sandwich, and got comfortable for the rest of the message. Should have done that when I first saw Seymour's face on the screen.

"Experimental Cognition planted a spy, a cute little girl type, to steal some mind templates. She seduced a grad student, then an assistant professor, and apparently then Finegold himself. She extracted a lot of free code before she was finally caught and linked back to Ex Cog.

"Well, you know how Titan politics are. Turns out, Ex Cog had a bigger budget and more pull with the Deans, so Finegold gets the ouster. He

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packs up a few loyalists and he goes Homesteader. They've got a pretty good outfit, judging by their startup package. I'd give them a good ten more years before they come crawling back or die out.

"So meanwhile back on Titan, the legislature starts to get antsy about all this posthuman business, and a lot of what Ex Cog does becomes illegal. Eventually even Titan U can't protect them from the angry villagers with the pitchforks, and, well, we know where this all ends up, right? In the Kuiper Belt on a snowball called A Better Way.

"Let me tell you about this so-called Better Way. You dug up some of the obvious stuff, but they've also got work going on in nanotech, uploading human minds into computers, all sorts of ways of getting to the posthuman future. It all sounds rather flaky to me.

"So, anyway, these two colonies started out nowhere near each other out in the frozen hinterland, but twenty years go by and orbits are eccentric and rings turn inside of rings, and now they're practically neighbors. Coincidence? Ah, maybe. Or maybe an elaborate plot of revenge. . . .

"Actually, the whole revenge thing is my idea. The analyst, an AI of course, didn't have the imagination to come up with that. AI's just don't have that sense of drama. Anyhow, the AI thinks that A Better Way is setting up a conflict between The High Fantastic Empire and the City of Reason for some nefarious purpose.

"Here's why I'm telling you all this. We've got a customer who's willing to pay you to stop those two kids from destroying the City of Reason. Eighty thousand oscus, of which we take our usual 20 percent finder's fee. Shouldn't be too hard a job, considering they're not armed.

"There, you have your mission! Good luck, mazel tov, bon voyage, and all that. Oh, and be careful. What did I forget? I can't think of anything. We're downloading our analysis for you to study, standard crypto of the day. Any questions, feel free."

The analysis from the Coordinator Group AI confirmed my suspicion that the High Fantastic Empire was being set up. But to what end? Surely A Better Way wasn't trying to avoid the legal ramifications of genocide. This was the Kuiper Belt. There was no law out here. There were only people like me, the Damagers, and we didn't retaliate or punish evil-doers. Our only purpose among the homesteads was to prevent the rise of new pirates before they began to plague paying customers in the inner system.

As I scanned more of the data, less and less of it fit. The High Fantastic Empire was apparently completely uninvolved in this dispute. They were Martians, and, as such, hated authority. They were a weak colony, small and underdeveloped, experimenting on their minds not to produce superhumans, but just to understand themselves a little better. I was sure that the Trojan horse attacks had come, not from the City of Reason, but from A Better Way.

I didn't like the setup for a lot of reasons. Jesse Marslarsen was getting screwed, that much was certain, and I kind of liked him. The High Fantastic Empire was probably getting screwed as well, although it was their own fault for believing the charlatans of A Better Way. And most of all, the City of Reason was getting screwed. They were just trying to mind their own damned business and hadn't done anything to anybody.

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So it was up to me to put this tangled mess back to rights, champion of justice that I am. I laid in an intercept course for the *JAFR* and fired up the engines.

As soon as I saw the lifeboat separate from the *JAFR,* my first impulse was to cook it. I had the microwave laser powered up and targeted before the tactical computer had the situation analyzed.

It wasn't the bomb. The mass was all wrong, and it had no obvious guidance system. There had to be someone inside it, and I wanted to figure out who it was before I pulled the trigger.

We were just three hundred kilometers from the City of Reason. Both ships were decelerating fast, so there was more than enough time for me to get a 'bot onto the *JAFR* and disarm the bomb before it could be deployed, but the lifeboat changed things. I wanted that lifeboat back with the *JAFR* so I could deal with all of the variables in one place.

I quickly reprogrammed the 'bot and sent it to intercept the lifeboat, then I suited up and headed over to the *JAFR*. I wanted the bomb to get my full attention, and even if the 'bot couldn't handle getting the lifeboat back, it would at least be able to stop it from doing whatever it was supposed to do. I could deal with more variables once the bomb was no longer a threat.

I reached the *JAFR* and didn't bother with the airlock. I just cut my way inside, carving through the ice with chemical welding sticks, kicking out loose rocks behind me as I tunneled to the center. I reached the bomb in just a couple of minutes, and had the whole trigger device schematic mapped out in a couple more. I popped the screws on the trigger housing, wedged my screwdriver under the manual trigger input, and pried it off.

Now I could relax. I pulled out the rest of the trigger and disconnected it from the bomb. Then I dismantled the arming device and threw the loose parts up the tunnel behind me. Finally, I physically removed the explosive charges that would have compressed the deuterium/tritium mix and vented the fuel into vacuum.

The whole operation took me just under ten minutes. As I worked, I eavesdropped on the conversation between Jesse and Shaunasie.

"He's inside, he's inside the ship." Jesse was frantic. "What do I do?"

"There isn't much you can do, Jesse."

"But he's taking the bomb apart. Should I detonate it?"

"We're not close enough. It wouldn't do any damage to the City."

"I've got to stop him or the mission will be a failure. *I'll* be a failure. Why did they send me? I can't do anything!"

I got to admit I felt sorry for the kid. He was as easy to read over a voice connection as he was in person. I could hear his sobs clearly. It was too bad they had run into me. Too bad there was someone with money who wanted them to fail. Then again, most Damagers who took this contract would have simply destroyed their ship and collected the fee. The oversight board wouldn't question the use of lethal force in this circumstance. So, in a way, Jesse was lucky. I don't work that way.

It was obvious right away that Shaunasie was in the boat. She had seen the 'bot and was taking evasive action. She flew better than I had

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given her credit for, but the boat wasn't very maneuverable and the 'bot was closing. When my robot caught up with the boat, Shaunasie brought out the guns. I was pretty sure she had them, but I didn't know what I would have to do to flush them out. She took out the 'bot with a rail gun and resumed course. I had had about enough of her. Since I had no compunctions about blasting a silk puppet into atoms, there was no longer any reason not to open fire on the lifeboat. I was just about to relay that command to my ship when the defenses of the City of Reason made themselves evident.

The lifeboat and the *JAFR* were both snagged in a delicate carbon-fiber web. The *One in the Hand* was far enough back that it managed to see the threat and brake in time to avoid it. I pulled myself out to the end of the tunnel, analyzing the situation as I went.

It was a simple and effective defense. The web was invisible to radar because the threads were much smaller than the wavelength of radio waves. Individual threads weren't strong enough to stop even a weak ion drive, let alone a chemical rocket or a fusion torch. But they were arranged in such a way that any ship driving toward the City would pull more and more threads in, getting hopelessly tangled before it ever reached the center.

It was also a pretty expensive defense. There was enough carbon nanofiber in the cloud to make a sky hook for Mars. Even as I tried to figure out if I could get back to my ship through the holes in the net, I was wondering how they had managed to manufacture so much nanofiber with the limited resources of a homesteader. Then I remembered Seymour telling me that they were remarkably well-equipped for people who had left their homes to escape persecution or prosecution. They were not typical homesteaders at all. They even had some kind of sugar daddy in the inner system who was paying me to make sure they weren't harmed.

It looked like I needn't have bothered. Even if I hadn't shown up, the City of Reason would have been just fine. The property of the webs was such that the lifeboat and the *JAFR* were being pulled together the more they struggled to get free. I decided to hold off on killing Shaunasie until I figured out what her plan had been.

In the meantime, our presence at the gates of the City had been well announced. If Jesse and Shaunasie had been counting on stealth for their plan, that was ruined. We were getting pinged by whatever passed for traffic control in a place that never had any traffic, and I responded with my standard identification.

"Licensed Damager," I told them with a data squirt. "You are under attack. I have neutralized the threat and the situation is well in hand. Not to worry, folks. No cause for alarm."

Shaunasie was outside the boat as it drew closer. She was wearing state-of-the-art battle armor and carrying three powerful weapons. She had the rail gun she had used against the 'bot on an articulated targeting arm mounted behind her shoulders, a laser cannon ran along her right upper arm and was aimed by hand, and there was a rack of guided missiles on each leg.

I had the welding torch, a spring powered bolo thrower, and a pretty

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damned good defensible position down in the tunnel. I had the *One in the Hand* quietly burning me an escape route on the far side so that I could be out the other end before Shaunasie knew what I was doing.

I had multiple views to scroll through every few seconds, trying to keep track of what she was doing out there. The sensors I had seeded over the hull of the *JAFR* were showing the lifeboat's approach. The twisted metal remains of my robot was still feeding me video of her activities on the far side of the lifeboat. She was paying close attention to the nanofibers that were cocooning the boat, making sure she wasn't trapped against the hull.

I stuck my head out of the hole long enough to launch a tether to the boat. The line snaked through the nanofiber net, and the grapple bumped the hull and scuttled along to find something to grab onto. Once the boat was secure with one more line, I could move it where I wanted it to be. I poked out to fire another tether and Shaunasie launched a missile at me.

I ducked back into the hole and the missile tried to follow. But the guidance system got confused en route and the charge exploded harmlessly in space. I crawled back up the hole to throw the other line, and she used the laser. I let my suit take the hit and I got my line on. As I backed up down the hole, I bled the excess heat into the ice. I used the remote winches at the ends of the tethers to crank the boat around to a more advantageous position.

I had a pretty good shot with the bolo and Shaunasie's rail gun was hung up in the web, so I pulled myself back to the mouth of the hole. I hadn't figured on Jesse. I had dismissed him as too timid to join the fight, but damned if he didn't come up from underneath me and hit me with a ball of epoxy.

I got the bolo fired and Shaunasie incapacitated before I turned on Jesse. The epoxy had immobilized my legs in seconds, but you really don't need your legs that much in zero G combat.

I could easily see through Jesse's visor that he was enraged. He came at me with surprising fury for someone who had been shaking in his boots a few minutes earlier. He fired the epoxy gun again and just missed completely smothering me. I lit the welding torch. Much as I hated to use the non-lethal weapon on the creature outside and the lethal one on this poor kid, I had my survival to think of.

He backed away down the tunnel, the fear on his face as clear as the anger that had been there before. But he didn't drop the gun. He turned down my new escape route and I followed. But as I turned the corner, I hit a wall of newly setting epoxy. I started working the edges with my torch when the wall of liquid helium hit me from behind. Before I could figure out where the hell it had come from, I was frozen.

"He's coming around."

"You mean he really is alive?"

"He's probably got some enhancements. He'd have to in his line of work. Didn't you want him to survive?"

"I wasn't thinking."

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"You could have fooled me. You set the perfect trap. It isn't easy to trick a Damager like that."

She had a point. How *had* he managed to trick me? I'd had him pegged as completely useless, and here he transforms himself into an instant genius.

"I guess I just got lucky. The coolant pipe was buried nearby, and I was able to seal off enough of the tunnels that the helium filled the whole chamber."

"Well, you did good. We might need him alive."

"Why?"

"Did you hear what he said just before I attacked him? He told the City that he had the situation in hand. They haven't sent anyone out here to investigate. He bought us some time. We need to use it to our best advantage."

"So why do we need *him?*"

"We might need him if we have to buy more time. We might need to reassure the City that everything is under control and they just need to stay put."

"But he isn't going to help us," Jesse said.

"I have ways of getting him to do what we want."

"Are you talking about torture?"

"More like mind control," Shaunasie said.

This much I knew: I was immobilized, naked, and I wasn't getting any radio coming in. I tried getting messages out, but I didn't receive any acknowledgement from the *One in the Hand*. That could be bad. If the ship didn't hear from me in a certain amount of time, it would start thinking for itself, and you don't want to be around when it does that. I couldn't tell how long I'd been out. I opened my eyes.

"You're making a serious mistake," I told the two young people hovering in front of me. I was strapped to a board by sheets of carbon nanofiber. It looked like it might have come from the web that had probably encased the entire ship by now.

"I knew you would say that," Shaunasie said. "No one is going to come and rescue you. Nobody will avenge your death all the way out here." I looked at her face and smiled in spite of myself. The crystal teardrop on her right cheek had been covered by a band-aid. Nice touch. She had shut off access to her core programming. She had probably figured out what I had done before. Very nice.

"What time is it? How long was I out?"

Jesse started to answer, but Shaunasie stopped him. "Let's not tell him anything. Any information he has, he will try to use."

"Six hours," I said. "When I've been silent for six hours, my ship wakes up. And it wakes up angry. Do the math, and tell me if we have anything to worry about."

I could read the answer in Jesse's face. We had time, but not much. "I'm guessing less than an hour." Jesse's flinch was a confirmation, and Shaunasie shot him a dirty look.

"We've got to get moving," she said.

"Do you think he's serious? What if he's bluffing?"

"We should move as quickly as we can anyway."

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"Jesse, there's something you should know about your comrade here."

Jesse stopped and looked at me, then at Shaunasie. "He's stalling," Shaunasie said. "Don't listen to him. He's going to use whatever he can to stop us. Remember that."

"You forget, girl. I don't give a shit whether you succeed or fail. It isn't my job."

"Is that why you took our bomb apart?"

"Somebody paid me to stop you from setting off the bomb. They didn't say anything about your other plans. If you have another objective, feel free to go about your business. You *do* have another objective, don't you? Something you didn't bother to tell Jesse?"

Jesse continued to look from me to Shaunasie and back. His emotions were, as always, perfectly clear on his face. He was confused, curious, and determined, all at the same time. It was a potent mix to work with.

"Did you know that A Better Way has a score to settle with the City of Reason? They were allies back on Titan, but they had a falling-out. Now here they are again, twenty years later. It's a good thing that A Better Way found the High Fantastic Empire to dupe into taking action for them."

Jesse looked back at Shaunasie. "You knew them on Titan? You told us you wanted to help us."

"The City of Reason never attacked you, Jesse. That was A Better Way. All part of the plan. So was sending along a pretty girl to help you with the bomb. Only she isn't a girl, Jesse. She's a bundle of sophont silk riding in a girl's body. Go ahead, ask her how she plans to control my mind."

"Where do you come up with this stuff?" Shaunasie said, shaking her head. "Sophont silk? Jesse, think for a minute. You have no reason to trust this man. You've worked with me for a long time. You just *met* him! You know me, *he's* a stranger. He wants to stop us from doing what we came here to do."

"But the bomb is gone," Jesse said. "We can't do what we came here to do."

"We can do other things, Jesse. The bomb was just plan A. Let's go talk about the other plans and see what we can do to salvage the mission."

"These other plans, why didn't you tell me about them? Is this what you were going to do when you went off in the lifeboat?"

"I told you, Jesse, I was doing reconnaissance. I didn't have another plan until he took the bomb apart."

"So what can we do now?"

"The City of Reason has vulnerable points. . . ."

"There was no way I was going to get through undetected," Jesse blurted out. "You claimed that they had no defenses. This nanofiber web is incredibly sophisticated!"

"And undetectable. We couldn't have known . . ."

"You said you'd analyzed their colony, you knew the weak points. Was that just a lie? Was the bomb even real? I was a decoy, wasn't I?"

Ah, that's my boy. He was finally starting to think with his brain. "Watch out, kid," I told him. "She's not going to let this mission fail just because it smells bad to you."

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Jesse glanced at me and that was Shaunasie's opening. I saw the knife flash behind him, and before I could shout a warning, she had buried it in his back. Again, the young man surprised me. He doubled up, slapped his hands on the floor, and mule-kicked her right across the little room. He followed on his own trajectory and pinned her to the bulkhead with his knee.

Shaunasie's reflexes were good. To a machine, fighting is just another mathematical puzzle. If you've got the right software, you can work a counter to just about any move. I was expecting her to give him a shot in the pills, but apparently her software found that far too obvious. She managed a good nose smash, then, when she worked her way free, a kick at the still-embedded knife. Then, only after she had lined up an escape path and fought free of his hands, she gave him a shot in the pills.

Jesse was in bad shape. He didn't go after her, but he hadn't had all the fight beaten out of him yet. Instead, he jumped toward me. As he worked his way around behind me, I briefly imagined that he was going to set me free to help him fight her. I was wrong. He pulled the board free and used me as a shield to rush her.

By now, Shaunasie had reached a weapon, a little steam knife that works great in close combat on a ship. The superheated water vapor comes out with enough force to cut flesh but not metal, and the heat even cauterizes the wound so you don't get the room fouled up with a lot of messy blood droplets. And I was sailing across the room right toward it.

I didn't have radio any more for some reason, but I still had the laser in the corner of my right eye. And the little band-aid on Shaunasie's right cheek was torn off. I focused on the tear-drop lens and hacked like I'd never hacked before. I had a couple of seconds before the short-range weapon would be able to slice me to ribbons.

I had gotten a lot of information out of her before, but she had shut off all the access routes I had used. There was one fairly simple command structure I was able to get into, however. It was a subroutine that had been loaded up recently but hadn't yet been used.

What I had in mind was only going to slow her down for a few seconds. I wasn't sure if Jesse would be able to take advantage of the opening that would give him. He was a strange kid, volatile and inexperienced, but capable of wild brilliance at times.

Then it hit me, the whole meaning of the trans-emotional thing. The manifesto had said something about tapping into emotions to solve problems the intellect couldn't handle. The little subroutine Shaunasie had queued up but never utilized would invoke a strong emotional response in Jesse. If I was right, that response would save both our asses.

Seemed like a long shot, but, as I said before, couple of seconds. Tick tick. What the hell? I kept my laser on target and sent the command.

She let go of the knife and it drifted away. "I've been thinking about what you said before, Jesse," she told him. "And you're right. It's time we take this relationship to the next level."

Jesse let go of the board I was strapped to. "What?"

I put all of the command I could into my voice. "Jesse, move quick. Grab her!"

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To his credit, Jesse did move quickly. He grabbed her shoulders and held her. The back of his shirt was soaked, and droplets of his blood floated in the air between them.

"Jesse," she said with a breathy tone. "I love you." Jesse looked deeply into her eyes.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, he's falling for it! "Jesse," I snapped. "It's a trick. Throw her in the airlock."

They were both lost to me, wrapped up in the programming their elders had installed in their brains. I had a pretty good idea how long Shaunasie would be controlled by the romantic macro I had activated. I had no idea whether Jesse would snap out of it before she did. I couldn't afford to wait around and find out.

I couldn't see very well because my board had spun away from the action. When I looked back at the place I had been held, I noticed that there was a wire cage, hastily constructed, against the wall. A faraday cage. That was how they had blocked my radio. I put in a call to the *One in the Hand* right away. In its strange mechanical way, the ship had missed me. It was only six minutes more until it would have awakened and built another copy of me to download my latest backup into. I was just in time to avert *that* nightmare.

I had already modeled the entire tactical situation in my own dataspace, and now I had the ship's targeting computer to run a large series of simulations. The positions and trajectories of the *JAFR* and the *One in the Hand*, the two kids starting to wake up from their ill-timed romantic interlude, the open airlock door and the emergency evacuation button, and me. In less than a second, I had the answer to my problem.

Making a lump of ice like the *JAFR* dance with a laser is pretty easy. Drilling the escape tunnel without spinning the ship took a lot more precision. I calculated the perfect angle, told the ship to fire, and prepared myself for an uncomfortable encounter with a bulkhead. The ship swung about, propelled by steam escaping from the side, and the open airlock loomed up to swallow Jesse and Shaunasie whole. At the same time, the corner of the board that held me prisoner drifted toward the emergency evac button. I slowly turned in time to see the two of them drifting into my trap.

They seemed just about to kiss, but I could see Shaunasie's hand reaching down behind Jesse's back to twist the knife. He looked completely lost in the moment, lust and longing on his face. Then I noticed his legs spreading apart and that didn't fit his expression. As they reached the airlock door, Jesse let go of Shaunasie and spread his arms wide. His hands and feet just managed to stop him outside the little chamber, as I hit the emergency evacuation button. The inner door slid shut with Shaunasie inside and the outer door opened without the chamber pumping down first.

Shaunasie held on to the inner door as best she could. She stayed conscious a lot longer than an unenhanced human would have. I couldn't see her, but Jesse watched the whole thing through the window and I could see his face clearly. That was all I needed to know that she was dead.

* * *

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The City of Reason finally agreed to let Jesse go. I had vouched for him, and he genuinely seemed sorry for what he had done. They did ask for Shaunasie's body, and eventually I figured out why. They needed her to complete her mission. Not the mission that she had told Jesse about when they left the High Fantastic Empire, and not the secret mission she thought she was supposed to carry out once they got here. It turns out there was yet a third mission, so secret even she didn't know about it. Not even the elders of A Better Way knew about it. It was the mission given to her by the City of Reason.

I managed to get a lot of data out of her once she was dead. I had a device in my space suit that could map the quantum storage bits in the sophont silk in her skull without a trace. That was important, the no trace thing, because the City of Reason specifically prohibited me from examining the body while they shuttled out and unwound the *JAFR* from the nanofiber web.

I didn't get to analyze the data until after the inquest, after Jesse and I had been escorted back through the one safe passage through the web and were back on my ship. I thought I was going to find out more about what A Better Way had been up to. I did, but it wasn't what I was expecting.

The people who had set up A Better Way had been rivals of the people who had set up the City of Reason. But before that, they had been collaborators. Experimental Cognition supplied the hardware in the form of enhanced and augmented human brains, and the Institute for Introspection provided the software, the thought structures that would run on those brains. It seems they gave Ex Cog a little something extra. Without even knowing it, A Better Way had been working on a prototype for the perfect posthuman as designed by the citizens of the City of Reason.

And I had just delivered that prototype to the designers.

"I still can't believe she wasn't human," Jesse said after I finished showing him my ship. "I really felt something for her. I thought she felt something for me. And now, to find out it was all a fake . . . That thing she said right at the end, the last thing she said to me, that was probably just a programming glitch. She was probably going to use that against me, and it just came out at the wrong time. She never loved me at all."

"Ain't that a corker?" I said. I pulled myself into the command chair in front of the main console and winked at the picture of my mother. It was good to be back again. I had made a tidy sum on this little mission, even though I had probably not done what my client had hired me to do. It's a caveat emptor thing, you know? If they wanted me to kill Shaunasie before she got to the City of Reason they should have just told me to kill her. All this pussy-footing around is no way to get things done.

Ah, well, at least I'd lived to tell the Coordinator Group what was going on out here among the dirty snowballs. To think how narrowly I'd escaped having to confront a restored copy upon returning. The existential headaches, the legal hassle, not to mention the sleeping arrangements.

"Posthumans," Jesse said, shaking his head.

"Posthumans," I agreed. "Fuck 'em." ○

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WATER ANGEL

Bruce McAllister

It's been more than ten years ("South Paw," August 1993) since we published a story by Bruce McAllister. The author's short fiction appeared in science fiction magazines, original anthologies, and "year's best" volumes from the sixties to the early nineties. We're delighted that he's returned to writing fantasy and science fiction with the following beautiful and deeply moving tale. Mr. McAllister's two novels are *Humanity Prime,* the last novel in Terry Carr's "Ace Specials" series, and *Dream Baby* (Tor Books, 1988). After teaching at a university for twenty years, the author now makes a living as a writing coach and book and screenplay consultant.

When the boy was still too young to know how terrible love could be, he lived with his family on a great bay. The bay reached from his beach—a private military beach reserved for officers' families, but one that was always empty—to the horizon, past a vast island where jet fighters glistened in the distant sun and thundered overhead when you least expected it. There, at his beach, the clear shallow water stretched to the end of what was called Shelter Island, broken only by the narrow channel that the boats of the two yacht clubs needed for their comings and goings from the marina. Such things as these—boats and motors and luncheons with women in hats and men in white trousers—did not interest the boy, who wanted to spear, but not kill, the marvelous animals that lived only three, four or five feet below the clear water on the sand and mud. This he did alone, while on the other side of a tall, chain-link fence at the end of his beach, the other children his age, the civilians, played on a little beach called Kellogg's. He did not stand by that fence and look at the other children. He did not hook his fingers in the chain link of that fence and stare at them, feeling the loneliness. He had done that at the beginning, and now he did what he wanted to do, forgetting them.

He would get the flat-bottomed rowboat from the nearest Navy dock

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and row it to his beach. When the water was shallow enough, he would pole the boat along with his spear toward the channel that lay between him and Shelter Island. The animals were miraculous and made him glad, and he wanted to *have* them, but without killing them, so he speared them by the tails—just by the tails. It was all right because when he let them go, they lived. It made him happy to forget the other beach, look for the creatures in the clear water, and, heart hammering, spear them, only to let them go again.

There were stingrays and banjo rays and butterfly rays, skates and sole and an occasional flounder or bright-pink sculpin. The sole, flounder, and sculpins he did keep, cleaning them and giving them to his grandmother to cook. He would glide over the rays as if in a dream; and when they moved, their wings would rise, the sand and silt with them, and they would fly through the water away from him. What was he to them, he wondered—some great manta ray in their deepest memory, some god of rays and skates? Or was he to them, in their simple brains and innocence, only line, shadow, and movement—a geometry made by the prow of the little boat and the angle of his arm as he blocked the sun and poled the boat along with his spear? He wondered about these things sometimes, but mostly he was simply content, mesmerized by the living things below him, how they moved, how, invisible to him unless he looked hard, they became visible in their motion and flight. Alien and exciting with the perfectly shaped blades on their tails, the bony ridges down their backs, their rough gums, their wound-like gills and wide eyes, which held his—the hunter's—when they met for a moment. It was the one thing that made life wonderful on this side of the fence, at this beach that only he used.

The day he speared what he thought at first was a bright white angel ray—wide wings and beautiful spots—but wasn't, he was out in the shallow water at the end of the fence that separated his beach from Kellogg's. A few children and their mothers played on the sand in the distance, on the other beach, and meant nothing to him. He had already speared a banjo ray, a small leopard shark and two stingrays—all by the tail (he never missed), letting them go.

When he looked down into the water, he saw the fleshy wings. They were open on the sand like a snow angel's, white and still and as perfect in their symmetries as light from a prism. There were things he'd never seen before on a ray or skate—things like tiny, smooth legs on either side of the tail—but he paid no attention, thinking they were simply longer fins than some rays and skates had. There were lines that narrowed the head, too, like a neck, and, though he had to be mistaken, he could not see the eyes on the back of the head. There would have to be eyes. Perhaps they were closed and covered with sand. And those lines could not be a neck. There could be no neck, no real neck, like his. The creature didn't move. It was, he assured himself, feeding on the small crustaceans in the sand, not needing to do anymore than move its mandibles gently, quietly, as it rested there on the sand below him, unaware.

As he raised his spear with its three barbed tines—the head he had himself mounted without any one's help on the end of a broomstick—the creature rolled. It wasn't possible. But it did roll, its wings folding under

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and around it so that it could spin and look up at him, which it did, just as he brought the spear down at the tail. The tail wasn't there anymore. It was gone and the spear struck spine instead, up into the body of the creature that rolled beneath him. But this was not what made him stop breathing. It was the *face* that he saw suddenly looking up at him. Two eyes staring up at him like a child's, like a person's, but brown and pupilless, and a mouth that could not be a skate's or ray's, even though the fleshy wings were rippling against the sand just as a skate's or ray's would, one whose spine was locked in the head of a spear and hurting terribly.

He was suddenly so dizzy that he almost his balance. He did not wish to lose his spear, so he held on, and a blood the color of squid ink darkened the water as the creature flailed beneath him. *What are you?* he asked it, and when it didn't answer, he knew: *There are things in the universe beyond what we know, and this is one of them.*

He wanted to let it go—to get away from it, to let it live and to forget it if he could—but when he pulled and twisted at the spear to dislodge it, he felt its weight on the other end in the roiling black and purple water; and when he started to lose his balance again, he dropped to his knees and had no choice but to pull it into the boat.

As he did, he saw it clearly at last, the thick wings built for water, the atrophied legs hanging loosely at its sides, the tail short but useful, and all of it slick with mucus and squid-ink blood and sand. It flailed in the air, covering the floorboards with the ink, covering his legs with splatters of it; and though he wanted to grab it, hold it, get the spear free, return it to the water, close his eyes and breathe again and not stop breathing, he could not. It was looking at him and making a keening sound—not a bird's, not a baby's—but something else. *If a thing like you lives in this world, what else might there be—a monster in a lake, a caveman walking in the northern woods, Little People who like to play tricks, demons, God Himself? Who are we if you are here and we didn't know it? Who are we in the night, with our fences, if you have been here all along and we have killed you?*

As he reached for it at last, making himself do it, the creature's babies came out of it. Its legs parted, its tail arched, the wings shuddered, and from between those legs came the babies, perfect miniatures, clean and white like newborn calves. As they did, something moved inside him, the world tilted and would never be the same again.

Later, he would not remember what he did with them. Did he put them in the water knowing they would die? He had stared at them, yes, wanting to touch them, hold them, but afraid to, thinking, "If they were born when I speared her, they were born too early and they will die." He remembered this at least. He had, yes, picked her up, feeling her flesh and somehow getting her off the spear and putting her back into the water, knowing that she would die too, and not knowing what else to do. He had speared her in her body, too high, and she would not make it. Did he do the same with the babies? Did he pick them up, the eight of them—their eyes unblinking, their mouths wide open without a sound, their legs kicking feebly, their wings rippling in the air—and put them in the water,

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watching them sink and disappear too? He could not remember. He could not remember even when, years later, he tried to tell a man in another city, in an office somewhere, about his dreams, about the voices he heard in the house at night as his own children slept, but could not remember what he had done.

They had been like kittens, puppies, and other babies that could not live without you, now that their mother was dead. They had appeared suddenly in the boat like a story he didn't know was being told, like the glimpse of a naked woman through a window when you are a child and have never seen one before. He had become very aware of the spear in his hand. He did not know what to do with it. This he remembered. It had been his story he was telling, not theirs, and now it was *their* story—a story that had nothing to do with him, his life, his world and the creatures and the people in it—and he did not know what to do.

When the boat was empty, and only the slick squid ink remained on the floorboards, he went home. He went out again not many days later with his little brother, and this helped. While his brother rowed, the boy speared thirty-six rays, skates, and small sharks—all no bigger than two feet apiece and all thrown back alive. He checked each creature's outline below them before he speared it, and, of course, they were the skates and rays he knew. There would not be another like her.

A week after that, he went out on his own and speared another twenty-two, but this didn't help. Years later, when he tried to recall it, sitting with his children in a living room while they all watched TV, he would not be able to remember whether he went out again that summer. It didn't matter. What mattered was that, years later, when he was married and had his own children, those children were more important than anything to him—much more than his own life—and all he could do was sit beside them, their wide eyes unblinking, their faces white as heaven, and wonder whether he would be able to save them when their turn came to face the spear. O

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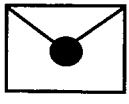

ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION
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Connie Willis is currently working on a new novel called *All Clear.* Set in the same time-travel world as *Doomsday Book, To Say Nothing of the Dog,* and "Fire Watch" (*Asimov's,* February 1982), the novel involves four historians studying World War II, from the evacuation of the children in 1939 to the Blitz to the deception war that preceded D-Day. The book will be out in the spring from Bantam. Her latest tale for *Asimov's* takes a look at a psychic debunker, his beautiful assistant, and a very unusual . . .

INSIDE JOB

Connie Willis

"Nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American people."

—H.L. Mencken

"It's me, Rob," Kildy said when I picked up the phone. "I want you to go with me to see somebody Saturday."

Usually when Kildy calls, she's bubbling over with details. "You've *got* to see this psychic cosmetic surgeon, Rob," she'd crowed the last time. "His specialty is liposuction, and you can *see* the tube coming out of his sleeve. And that's not all. The fat he's supposed to be suctioning out of their thighs is that goop they use in McDonald's milkshakes. You can smell the vanilla! It wouldn't fool a five-year-old, so of course half the women in Hollywood are buying it hook, line, and sinker. We've *got* to do a story on him, Rob!"

I usually had to say, "Kildy—Kildy—Kildy!" before I could get her to shut up long enough to tell me where he was performing.

But this time all she said was, "The seminar's at one o'clock at the Beverly Hills Hilton. I'll meet you in the parking lot," and hung up before I could ask her if the somebody she wanted me to see was a pet channeler or a vedic-force therapist, and how much it was going to cost.

I called her back.

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"The tickets are on me," she said.

If Kildy had her way, the tickets would always be on her, and she can more than afford it. Her father's a director at Dreamworks, her current stepmother heads her own production company, and her mother's a two-time Oscar winner. And Kildy's rich in her own right—she only acted in four films before she quit the business for a career in debunking, but one of them was the surprise top grosser of the year, and she'd opted for shares instead of a salary.

But she's ostensibly my employee, even though I can't afford to pay her enough to keep her in toenail polish. The least I can do is spring for expenses, and a barely known channeler shouldn't be too bad. Medium Charles Fred, the current darling of the Hollywood set, was only charging two hundred a seance.

"*The Jaundiced Eye* is paying for the tickets," I said firmly. "How much?"

"Seven hundred and fifty apiece for the group seminar," she said. "Fifteen hundred for a private enlightment audience."

"The tickets are on you," I said.

"Great," she said. "Bring the Sony videocam."

"Not the little one?" I asked. Most psychic events don't allow recording devices—they make it too easy to spot the earpieces and wires—and the Hasaka is small enough to be smuggled in.

"No," she said, "bring the Sony. See you Saturday, Rob. Bye."

"Wait," I said. "You haven't told me what this guy does."

"Woman. She's a channeler. She channels an entity named Isis," Kildy said and hung up again.

I was surprised. We don't usually waste our time on channelers. They're no longer trendy. Right now mediums like Charles Fred and Yogi Magaputra and assorted sensory therapists (aroma-, sonic-, auratic-) are the rage.

It's also an exercise in frustration, since there's no way to prove whether someone's channeling or not, unless they claim to be channeling Abraham Lincoln (like Randall Mars) or Nefertiti (like Hanh Nah). In that case you can challenge their facts—Nefertiti could *not* have had an affair with Alexander the Great, who wasn't born till a thousand years later, and she was not Cleopatra's cousin—but most of them channel hundred-thousand-year-old sages or high priests of Lemuria, and there are no physical manifestations.

They've learned their lesson from the Victorian spiritualists (who kept getting caught), so there's no ectoplasm or ghostly trumpets or double-exposed photographic plates. Just a deep, hollow voice that sounds like a cross between Obi-Wan Kenobi and Basil Rathbone. Why is it that channeled "entities" all have British accents? And speak King James Bible English?

And why was Kildy willing to waste fifteen hundred bucks—correction, twenty-two fifty; she'd already been to the seminar once—to have me see this Isis? The channeler must have a new gimmick. I'd noticed a couple of people advertising themselves as "angel channelers" in the local psychic rag, but Isis wasn't an angel name. Egyptian channeler? Goddess conduit?

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I looked "Isis-channeler" up on the net. At first I couldn't find any references, even using Google. I tried skeptics.org and finally Marty Rumboldt, who runs a website that tracks psychics.

"You're spelling it wrong, Rob," he e-mailed me back. "It's Isus."

Which should have occurred to me. The channelers of Lazaris, Kochise, and Merlynn all use variations on historical names (probably from some fear of spiritual slander lawsuits), and more than one channeler's prone to "inventive" spellings: Joye Wildde. And Emmanual.

I googled "Isus." He—bad sign, the channeler didn't even know Isis was female—was the "spirit entity" channeled by somebody named Ariaura Keller. She'd started in Salem, Massachusetts (a breeding ground for psychics), moved to Sedona (another one), and then headed west and worked her way down the coast, appearing in Seattle, the other Salem, Eugene, Berkeley, and now Beverly Hills. She had six afternoon seminars and two week-long "spiritual immersions" scheduled for L.A., along with private "individually scheduled enlightenment audiences" with Isus. She'd written two books, *The Voice of Isus* and *On the Receiving End* (with links to amazon.com), and you could read her bio: "I knew from childhood that I was destined to be a channel for the Truth," and extracts from her speeches: "The earth is destined to witness a transforming spiritual event," online. She sounded just like every other channeler I'd ever heard.

And I'd sat through a bunch of them. Back at the height of their popularity (and before I knew better), *The Jaundiced Eye* had done a six-part series on channelers, starting with M.Z. Lord and running on through Joye Wildde, Todd Phoenix, and Taryn Kryme, whose "entity" was a giggly six-year-old kid from Atlantis. It was the longest six months of my life. And it didn't have any impact at all on the business. It was tax evasion and mail fraud charges that had put an end to the fad, not my hard-hitting exposés.

Ariaura Keller didn't have a criminal record (at least under that name), and there weren't many articles about her. And no mention of any gimmick. "The electric, amazing Isus shares his spiritual wisdom and helps you find your own inner-centeredness and soul-unenfoldment." Nothing new there.

Well, whatever it was that had gotten Kildy interested in her, I'd find out on Saturday. In the meantime, I had an article on Charles Fred to write for the December issue, a book on intelligent design (the latest ploy for getting creationism into the schools and evolution out) to review, and a past-life chiropractor to go see. He claimed his patients' backaches came from hauling blocks of stone to Stonehenge and/or the Pyramids. (The Pyramids had in fact been a big job, but over the course of three years in business he'd told over two thousand patients they'd gotten their herniated discs at Stonehenge, every single one of them while setting the altar stone in place.)

And he was actually credible compared to Charles Fred, who was having amazing success communicating highly specific messages from the dead to their grieving relatives. I was convinced he was doing something besides the usual cold reading and shills to get the millions he was raking in, but so far I hadn't been able to figure out what, and every lead I managed to come up with went nowhere.

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I didn't think about the "electric, amazing Isus" again till I was driving over to the Hilton Saturday. Then it occurred to me that I hadn't heard from Kildy since her phone call. Usually she drops by the office every day, and if we're going somewhere calls three or four times to reconfirm where and when we're meeting. I wondered if the seminar was still on, or if she'd forgotten all about it. Or suddenly gotten tired of being a debunker and gone back to being a movie star.

I'd been waiting for that to happen ever since the day just over eight months ago when, just like the gorgeous dame in a Bogie movie, she'd walked into my office and asked if she could have a job.

There are three cardinal rules in the skeptic business. The first one is, "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence," and the second one is, "If it seems too good to be true, it probably is." And if anything was ever too good to be true, it's Kildy. She's not only rich and movie-star beautiful, but intelligent, and, unlike everyone else in Hollywood, a complete skeptic, even though, as she told me the first day, Shirley MacLaine had dandled her on her knee and her own mother would believe anything, "no matter how ridiculous, which is probably why her marriage to my father lasted nearly six years."

She was now on Stepmother Number Four, who had gotten her the role in the surprise top grosser "that made almost as much money as *Lord of the Rings* and enabled me to take early retirement."

"Retirement?" I'd said. "Why would you want to retire? You could have—"

"Starred in *The Hulk III*," she said, "and been on the cover of the *Globe* with Ben Affleck. Or with my lawyer in front of a rehab center. I know, it was tough to give all that up."

She had a point, but that didn't explain why she'd want to go to work for a barely making-it magazine like *The Jaundiced Eye*. Or why she'd want to go to work at all.

I said so.

"I've already tried the whole 'fill your day with massages and lunch at Ardani's and sex with your trainer' scene, Rob," she said. "It was even worse than *The Hulk*. Plus, the lights and makeup *destroy* your complexion."

I found that hard to believe. She had skin like honey.

"And then my mother took me to this luminescence reading—she's into all those things, psychics and past-life regression and intuitive healing, and the guy doing the reading—"

"Lucius Windfire," I'd said. I'd been working on an exposé of him for the last two months.

"Yes, Lucius Windfire," she'd said. "He claimed he could read your mind by determining your vedic fault lines, which consisted of setting candles all around you and 'reading' the wavering of the flames. It was obvious he was a fake—you could see the earpiece he was getting his information over—but everybody there was eating it up, especially my mother. He'd already talked her into private sessions that set her back ten thousand dollars. And I thought, somebody should put him out of business, and then I thought, that's what I want to do with my life, and I looked up 'debunkers' online and found your magazine, and here I am."

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I'd said, "I can't possibly pay you the kind of money you're—"

"Your going rate for articles is fine," she'd said and flashed me her better-than-Julia-Roberts smile. "I just want the chance to do something useful and sensible with my life."

And for the last eight months she'd been working with me on the magazine. She was wonderful—she knew everybody in Hollywood, which meant she could get us into invitation-only stuff, and heard about new spiritual fads even before I did. She was also willing to do anything, from letting herself be hypnotized to stealing chicken guts from psychic surgeons to proofreading galleys. And fun to talk to, and gorgeous, and much too good for a small-time skeptic.

And I knew it was just a matter of time before she got bored with debunking and went back to going to premieres and driving around in her Jaguar, but she didn't. "Have you ever *worked* with Ben Affleck?" she'd said when I told her she was too beautiful not to still be in the movies. "You couldn't *pay* me to go back to that."

She wasn't in the parking lot, and neither was her Jaguar, and I wondered, as I did every day, if this was the day she'd decided to call it quits. No, there she was, getting out of a taxi. She was wearing a honey-colored pantsuit the same shade as her hair, and designer sunglasses, and she looked, as always, too good to be true. She saw me and waved, and then reached back in for two big throw pillows.

Shit. That meant we were going to have to sit on the floor again. These people made a fortune scamming people out of their not-so-hard-earned cash. You'd think they could afford chairs.

I walked over to her. "I take it we're going in together," I said, since the pillows were a matching pair, purple brocade jobs with tassels at the corners.

"Yes," Kildy said. "Did you bring the Sony?"

"Yeah," I said. "I still think I should have brought the Hasaka."

She shook her head. "They're doing body checks. I don't want to give them an excuse to throw us out. When they fill out the nametags, give them your real name."

"We're not using a cover?" I asked. Psychics often use skeptics in the audience as an excuse for failure: the negative vibrations made it impossible to contact the spirits, etc. A couple of them had even banned me from their performances, claiming I disturbed the cosmos with my nonbelieving presence. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"We don't have any choice," she said. "When I came last week, I was with my publicist, so I had to use my own name, and I didn't think it mattered—we never do channelers. Besides, the ushers recognized me. So our cover is, I was so impressed with Ariaura that I talked you into coming to see her."

"Which is pretty much the truth," I said. "What exactly is her gimmick, that you thought I should see her?"

"I don't want to prejudice you beforehand." She glanced at her Vera Wang watch and handed me one of the pillows. "Let's go."

We went into the lobby and over to a table under a lilac-and-silver banner proclaiming "Presenting Ariaura and the Wisdom of Isus" and under

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it, "Believe and It Will Happen." Kildy told the woman at the table our names.

"Oh, I loved you in that movie, Miss Ross," she said and handed us lilac-and-silver nametags and motioned us toward another table next to the door, where a Russell Crowe type in a lilac polo shirt was doing security checks.

"Any cameras, tape recorders, videocams?" he asked us.

Kildy opened her bag and took out an Olympus. "Can't I take *one* picture?" she pleaded. "I won't use the flash or anything. I just wanted to get a photo of Ariaura."

He plucked the Olympus neatly from her fingers. "Autographed 8x10 glossies can be purchased in the waiting area."

"Oh, *good*," she said. She really should have stayed in acting.

I relinquished the videocam. "What about videos of today's performance?" I said after he finished frisking me.

He stiffened. "Ariaura's communications with Isus are not performances. They are unique glimpses into a higher plane. You can order videos of today's experience in the waiting area," he said, pointing toward a pair of double doors.

The "waiting area" was a long hall lined with tables full of books, videos, audiotapes, chakra charts, crystal balls, aromatherapy oils, amulets, Zuni fetishes, wisdom mobiles, healing stones, singing crystal bowls, amaryllis roots, aura cleansers, pyramids, and assorted other New Age junk, all with the lilac-and-silver Isus logo.

The third cardinal rule of debunking, and maybe the most important, is "Ask yourself, what do they get out of it?" or, as the Bible (source of many scams) puts it, "By their fruits shall ye know them."

And if the prices on this stuff were any indication, Ariaura was getting a hell of a lot out of it. The 8x10 glossies were $28.99, thirty-five with Ariaura's signature. "And if you want it signed by Isus," the blond guy behind the table said, "it's a hundred. He's not always willing to sign."

I could see why. His signature (done in Magic Marker) was a string of complicated symbols that looked like a cross between Elvish runes and Egyptian hieroglyphics, whereas Ariaura's was a script "A" followed by a formless scrawl.

Videotapes of her previous seminars—Volumes 1-20—cost a cool sixty apiece, and Ariaura's "sacred amulet" (which looked like something you'd buy on the Home Shopping Network) cost nine hundred and fifty (box extra). People were snapping them up like hotcakes, along with Celtic pentacles, meditation necklaces, dreamcatcher earrings, worry beads, and toe rings with your zodiac sign on them.

Kildy bought one of the outrageously priced stills (no signature) and three of the videos, cooing, "I just *loved* her last seminar," gave the guy selling them her autograph, and we went into the auditorium.

It was hung with rose, lilac, and silver chiffon floor-length banners and a state-of-the-art lighting system. Stars and planets rotated overhead, and comets occasionally whizzed by. The stage end of the auditorium was hung with gold mylar, and in the center of the stage was a black pyramid-backed throne. Apparently Ariaura did not intend to sit on the floor like the rest of us.

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At the door, ushers clad in mostly unbuttoned lilac silk shirts and tight pants took our tickets. They all looked like Tom Cruise, which would be par for the course even if this wasn't Hollywood.

Sex has been a mainstay of the psychic business since Victorian days. Half the appeal of early table-rapping had been the filmy-draperies-and-nothing-else clad female "spirits" who drifted tantalizingly among the male séance goers, fogging up their spectacles and preventing them from thinking clearly. Sir William Crookes, the famous British chemist, had been so besotted by an obviously fake medium's sexy daughter that he'd staked his scientific reputation on the medium's dubious authenticity, and nowadays it's no accident that most channelers are male and given to chest-baring Rudolph-Valentino-like robes. Or, if they're female, have buff, handsome ushers to distract the women in the audience. If you're drooling over them, you're not likely to spot the wires and chicken guts or realize what they're saying is nonsense. It's the oldest trick in the book.

One of the ushers gave Kildy a Tom Cruise smile and led her to the end of a cross-legged row on the very hard-looking floor. I was glad Kildy had brought the pillows.

I plopped mine next to hers and sat down on it. "This had better be good," I said. .

"Oh, it will be," a fifty-ish redhead wearing the sacred amulet and a diamond as big as my fist said. "I've seen Ariaura, and she's wonderful." She reached into one of the three lilac shopping bags she'd stuck between us and pulled out a needlepoint lavender pillow that said, "Believe and It Will Happen."

I wondered if that applied to her believing her pillow was large enough to sit on, because it was about the same size as the rock on her finger, but as soon as they'd finished organizing the rows, the ushers came around bearing stacks of plastic-covered cushions (the kind rented at football games, only lilac) for ten bucks apiece.

The woman next to me took three, and I counted ten other people in our row, and eleven in the row ahead of us shelling out for them. Eighty rows times ten, to be conservative. A cool eight thousand bucks, just to sit down, and who knows how much profit in all those lilac shopping bags. "By their fruits shall ye know them."

I looked around. I couldn't see any signs of shills or a wireless setup, but, unlike psychics and mediums, channelers don't need them. They give out general advice, couched in New Age terms.

"Isus is absolutely astonishing," my neighbor confided. "He's so *wise*! Much better than Ramtha. He's responsible for my deciding to leave Randall. 'To thine inner self be true,' Isus said, and I realized Randall had been *blocking* my spiritual ascent—"

"Were you at last Saturday's seminar?" Kildy leaned across me to ask.

"*No*. I was in Cancun, and I was just decimated when I realized I'd missed it. I made Tio bring me back early so I could come today. I desperately need Isus's wisdom about the divorce. Randall's claiming Isus had nothing to do with my decision, that I left him because the pre-nup had expired, and he's threatening to call Tio as—"

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But Kildy had lost interest and was leaning across *her* to ask a pencil-thin woman in the full lotus position if she'd seen Ariaura before. She hadn't, but the one on her right had.

"Last Saturday?" Kildy asked.

She hadn't. She'd seen her six weeks ago in Eugene.

I leaned toward Kildy and whispered, "What happened last Saturday?"

"I think they're starting, Rob," she said, pointing at the stage, where absolutely nothing was happening, and got off her pillow and onto her knees.

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

She didn't answer that either. She reached inside her pillow, pulled out an orange pillow the same size as the "Believe and It Will Happen" cushion, handed it to me, and arranged herself gracefully on the large tasseled one. As soon as she was crosslegged, she took the orange pillow back from me and laid it across her knees.

"Comfy?" I asked.

"Yes, thank you," she said, turning her movie-star smile on me.

I leaned toward her. "You sure you don't want to tell me what we're doing here?"

"Oh, look, they're starting," she said, and this time they were.

A Brad-Pitt lookalike stepped out on stage holding a hand mike and gave us the ground rules. No flash photos (even though they'd confiscated all the cameras). No applause (it breaks Ariaura's concentration). No bathroom breaks. "The cosmic link with Isus is extremely fragile," Brad explained, "and movement or the shutting of a door can break that connection."

Right. Or else Ariaura had learned a few lessons from EST, including the fact that people who are distracted by their bladders are less likely to spot gobbledygook, like the stuff Brad was spouting right now:

"Eighty thousand years ago Isus was a high priest of Atlantis. He lived for three hundred years before he departed this earthly plane and acquired the wisdom of the ages—"

What ages? The Paleolithic and Neolithic? Eighty thousand years ago we were still living in trees.

"—he spoke with the oracle at Delphi, he delved into the Sacred Writings of Rosicrucian—"

Rosicrucian?

"Now watch as Ariaura calls him from the Cosmic All to share his wisdom with you."

The lights deepened to rose, and the chiffon banners began to blow in, as if there was a breeze behind them. Correction, state-of-the-art lighting *and* fans.

The gale intensified, and for a moment I wondered if Ariaura was going to swoop in on a wire, but then the gold mylar parted, revealing a curving black stairway, and Ariaura, in a purple velvet caftan and her sacred amulet, descended it to the strains of Holst's *Planets* and went to stand dramatically in front of her throne.

The audience paid no attention to the "no applause" edict, and Ariaura seemed to expect it. She stood there for at least two minutes, regally sur-

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veying the crowd. Then she raised her arms as if delivering a benediction and lowered them again, quieting the crowd. "Welcome, Seekers after Divine Truth," she said in a peppy, Oprah-type voice, and there was more applause. "We're going to have a wonderful spiritual experience together here today and achieve a new plane of enlightenment."

More applause.

"But you mustn't applaud me. I am only the conduit through which Isus passes, the vessel he fills. Isus first came to me, or, rather, I should say, *through* me, five years ago, but I was afraid. I didn't want to believe it. It took me nearly a whole year to accept that I had become the focus for cosmic energies beyond the reality we know. It's the wisdom of his highly evolved spirit you'll hear today, not mine. If . . ." a nice theatrical pause here, ". . . he deigns to come to us. For Isus is a sage, not a servant to be bidden. He comes when he wills. Mayhap he will be among us this afternoon, mayhap not."

In a pig's eye. These women weren't going to shell out seven hundred and fifty bucks for a no-show, even if this was Beverly Hills. I'd bet the house Isus showed up right on cue.

"Isus will come only if our earthly plane is in alignment with the cosmic," Ariaura said, "if the auratic vibrations are right." She looked sternly out at the audience. "If any of you are harboring negative vibrations, contact cannot be made."

Uh-oh, here it comes, I thought, and waited for her to look straight at the two of us and tell us to leave, but she didn't. She merely said, "Are all of you thinking positive thoughts, feeling positive emotions? Are you all believing?"

You bet.

"I sense that every one of you is thinking positive thoughts," Ariaura said. "Good. Now, to bring Isus among us, you must help me. You must each calm your center." She closed her eyes. "You must concentrate on your inner soul-self."

I glanced around the audience. Over half of the women had their eyes shut, and many had folded their hands in an attitude of prayer. Some swayed back and forth, and the woman next to me was droning, "Om." Kildy had her eyes closed, her orange pillow clasped to her chest.

"Align . . . align . . ." Ariaura chanted, and then with finality, "Align." There was another theatrical pause.

"I will now attempt to contact Isus," she said. "The focusing of the astral energy is a dangerous and difficult operation. I must ask that you remain perfectly quiet and still while I am preparing myself."

The woman next to me obediently stopped chanting "Om," and everyone opened their eyes. Ariaura closed hers and leaned back on her throne, her ring-covered hands draped over the ends of the arms. The lights went down and the music came up, the theme from Holst's "Mars." Everyone, including Kildy, watched breathlessly.

Ariaura jerked suddenly as if she were being electrocuted and clutched the arms of the throne. Her face contorted, her mouth twisting and her head shaking. The audience gasped. Her body jerked again, slamming back against the throne, and she went into a series of spasms and

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writhings, with more shaking. This went on for a full minute, while "Mars" built slowly behind her and the spotlight morphed to pink. The music cut off, and she slumped lifelessly back against the throne.

She remained there for a nicely timed interval, and then sat up stiffly, staring straight ahead, her hands lying loosely on the throne's arms. "I am Isus!" she said in a booming voice that was a dead ringer for "Who dares to approach the great Oz?"

"I am the Enlightened One, a servant unto that which is called the Text and the First Source. I have come from the ninth level of the astral plane," she boomed, "to aid you in your spiritual journeys."

So far it was an exact duplicate of Romtha, right down to the pink light and the number of the astral plane level, but next to me Kildy was leaning forward expectantly.

"I have come to speak the truth," Isus boomed, "to reveal to thou thine higher self."

I leaned over to Kildy and whispered, "Why is it they never learn how to use 'thee' and 'thou' correctly on the astral plane?"

"Shh," Kildy hissed, intent on what Isus was saying.

"I bring you the long-lost wisdom of the kingdom of Lemuria and the prophecies of Antinous to aid thee in these troubled days, for thou livest in a time of tribulation. The last days these are of the Present Age, days filled with anxiety and terrorist attacks and dysfunctional relationships. But I say unto ye, thou must not look without but within, for thee alone are responsible for your happiness, and if that means getting out of a bad relationship, make it so. Seek you must your own inner isness and create thou must thine own inner reality. Thee art the universe."

I don't know what I'd been expecting. *Something*, at least, but this was just the usual New Age nonsense, a mush of psychobabble, self-help tips, pseudo-scripture, and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

I sneaked a glance at Kildy. She was sitting forward, still clutching her pillow tightly to her chest, her beautiful face intent, her mouth slightly open. I wondered if she could actually have been taken in by Ariaura. It's always a possibility, even with skeptics. Kildy wouldn't be the first one to be fooled by a cleverly done illusion.

But this wasn't cleverly done. It wasn't even original. The Lemuria stuff was Richard Zephyr, the "Thou art the universe" stuff was Shirley MacLaine, and the syntax was pure Yoda.

And this was Kildy we were talking about. Kildy, who never fell for anything, not even that devic levitator. She had to have a good reason for shelling out over two thousand bucks for this, but so far I was stumped. "What exactly is it you wanted me to see?" I murmured.

"*Shhh.*"

"But fear not," Ariaura said, "for a New Age is coming, an age of peace, of spiritual enlightenment, when you—doing here listening to this confounded claptrap?"

I looked up sharply. Ariaura's voice had changed in midsentence from Isus's booming bass to a gravelly baritone, and her manner had, too. She leaned forward, hands on her knees, scowling at the audience. "It's a lot of infernal gabble," she said belligerently.

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I glanced at Kildy. She had her eyes fixed on the stage.

"This hokum is even worse than the pretentious bombast you hear in the chautauqua," the voice croaked.

Chautauqua? I thought. What the—?

"But there you sit, with your mouths hanging open, like the rubes at an Arkansas camp meeting, listening to a snakecharming preacher, waiting for her to fix up your romances and cure your gallstones—"

The woman next to Kildy glanced questioningly at us and then back at the stage. Two of the ushers standing along the wall exchanged frowning glances, and I could hear whispering from somewhere in the audience.

"Have you yaps actually fallen for this mystical mumbo-jumbo? Of course you have. This is America, home of the imbecile and the ass!" the voice said, and the whispering became a definite murmur.

"What in the—?" a woman behind us said, and the woman next to me gathered up her bags, stuffed her "Believe" pillow into one of them, stood up, and began to step over people to get to the door.

One of the ushers signaled someone in the control booth, and the lights and Holst's "Venus" began to come up. The emcee took a hesitant step out onto the stage.

"You sit there like a bunch of gaping primates, ready to buy anyth—" Ariaura said, and her voice changed abruptly back to the basso of Isus, "—but the Age of Spiritual Enlightenment cannot begin until each of thou beginnest thy own journey."

The emcee stopped in mid-step, and so did the murmuring. And the woman who'd been next to me and who was almost to the door. She stood there next to it, holding her bags and listening.

"And believe. All of you, casteth out the toxins of doubt and skepticism now. *Believe* and it will happen."

She must be back on script. The emcee gave a sigh of relief, and retreated back into the wings, and the woman who'd been next to me sat down where she'd been standing, bags and pillows and all. The music faded, and the lights went back to rose.

"Believe in thine inner Soul-Self," Ariaura/Isus said. "Believe, and let your spiritual unenfoldment begin." She paused, and the ushers looked up nervously. The emcee poked his head out from the gold mylar drapes.

"I grow weary," she said. "I must return now to that higher reality from whence I cameth. Fear not, for though I no longer share this earthly plane with thee, still I am with thou." She raised her arm stiffly in a benediction/Nazi salute, gave a sharp shudder, and then slumped forward in a swoon that would have done credit to Gloria Swanson. Holst's "Venus" began again, and she sat up, blinking, and turned to the emcee, who had come out onstage again.

"Did Isus speak?" she asked him in her original voice.

"Yes, he did," the emcee said, and the audience burst into thunderous applause, during which he helped her to her feet and handed her over to two of the ushers, who walked her, leaning heavily on them, up the black stairway and out of sight.

As soon as she was safely gone, the emcee quieted the applause and

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said, "Copies of Ariaura's books and videotapes are available outside in the waiting area. If you wish to arrange for a private audience, see me or one of the ushers," and everyone began gathering up their pillows and heading for the door.

"Wasn't he *wonderful*?" a woman ahead of us in the exodus said to her friend. "So authentic!"

"Is Los Angeles the worst town in America, or only next to the worst? The skeptic, asked the original question, will say yes, the believer will say no. There you have it."

—H.L. Mencken

Kildy and I didn't talk till we were out of the parking lot and on Wilshire, at which point Kildy said, "Now do you understand why I wanted you to see it for yourself,, Rob?"

"It was interesting, all right. I take it she did the same thing at the seminar you went to last week?"

She nodded. "Only last week two people walked out."

"Was it the exact same spiel?"

"No. It didn't last quite as long—I don't know how long exactly, it caught me by surprise—and she used slightly different words, but the message was the same. And it happened the same way—no warning, no contortions, her voice just changed abruptly in mid-sentence. So what do you think's going on, Rob?"

I turned onto LaBrea. "I don't know, but lots of channelers do more than one 'entity.' Joye Wildde does two, and before Hans Lightfoot went to jail, he did half a dozen."

Kildy looked skeptical. "Her promotional material doesn't say anything about multiple entities."

"Maybe she's tired of Isus and wants to switch to another spirit. When you're a channeler, you can't just announce, 'Coming soon: Isus II.' You've got to make it look authentic. So she introduces him with a few words one week, a couple of sentences the next, et cetera."

"She's introducing a new and improved spirit who yells at the audience and calls them imbeciles and rubes?" she said incredulously.

"It's probably what channelers call a 'dark spirit,' a so-called bad entity that tries to lead the unwary astray. Todd Phoenix used to have a nasty voice break in in the middle of White Feather's spiel and make heckling comments. It's a useful trick. It reinforces the idea that the psychic's actually channeling, and anything inconsistent or controversial the channeler says can be blamed on the bad spirit."

"But Ariaura didn't even seem to be aware that there *was* a bad spirit, if that's what it was supposed to be. Why would it tell the audience to go home and stop giving their money to a snake-oil vendor like Ariaura?"

A snake-oil vendor? That sounded vaguely familiar, too. "Is that what she said last week? Snake-oil vendor?"

"Yes," she said. "Why? Do you know who she's channeling?"

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"No," I said, frowning, "but I've heard that phrase somewhere. And the line about the chautauqua."

"So it's obviously somebody famous," Kildy said.

But the historical figures channelers did were always instantly recognizable. Randall Mars's Abraham Lincoln began every sentence with "Four score and seven years ago," and the others were all equally obvious. "I wish I'd gotten Ariaura's little outburst on tape," I said.

"We did," Kildy said, reaching over the backseat and grabbing her orange pillow. She unzipped it, reached inside, and brought out a microvideocam. "Ta-da! I'm sorry I didn't get last week's. I didn't realize they were frisking people."

She fished in the pillow again and brought out a sheet of paper. "I had to run to the bathroom and scribble down what I could remember."

"I thought they didn't let people go to the bathroom."

She grinned at me. "I gave an Oscar-worthy performance of an actress they'd let out of rehab too soon."

I glanced at the list at the next stoplight. There were only a few phrases on it: the one she'd mentioned, and "I've never seen such shameless bilge," and "you'd have to be a pack of deluded half-wits to believe something so preposterous.'"

"That's all?"

She nodded. "I told you, it didn't last nearly as long last time. And since I wasn't expecting it, I missed most of the first sentence."

"That's why you were asking at the seminar about buying the videotape?"

"Uh-huh, although I doubt if there's anything on it. I've watched her last three videos, and there's no sign of Entity Number Two."

"But it happened at the seminar you went to and at this one. Has it occurred to you it might have happened *because* we were there?" I pulled into a parking space in front of the building where *The Jaundiced Eye* has its office.

"But—" she said.

"The ticket-taker could have alerted her that we were there," I said. I got out and opened her door for her, and we started up to the office. "Or she could have spotted us in the audience—you're not the only one who's famous. My picture's on every psychic wanted poster on the West Coast—and she decided to jazz up the performance a little by adding another entity. To impress us."

"That can't be it."

I opened the door. "Why not?"

"Because it's happened at least twice before," she said, walking in and sitting down in the only good chair. "In Berkeley and Seattle."

"How do you know?"

"My publicist's ex-boyfriend's girlfriend saw her in Berkeley—that's how my publicist found out about Ariaura—so I got her number and called her and asked her, and she said Isus was talking along about tribulation and thee being the universe, and all of a sudden this other voice said, 'What a bunch of boobs!' She said that's how she knew Ariaura was really channeling, because if it was fake she'd hardly have called the audience names."

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"Well, there's your answer. She does it to make her audiences believe her."

"You saw them, they already believe her," Kildy said. "And if that's what she's doing, why isn't it on the Berkeley videotape?"

"It isn't?"

She shook her head. "I watched it six times. Nothing."

"And you're sure your publicist's ex-boyfriend's girlfriend really saw it? That you weren't leading her when you asked her questions?"

"I'm sure," she said indignantly. "Besides, I asked my mother."

"She was there, too?"

"No, but two of her friends were, and one of them knew someone who saw the Seattle seminar. They all said basically the same thing, except the part about it making them believe her. In fact, one of them said, 'I think her cue cards were out of order,' and told me not to waste my money, that the person I should go see was Angelina Black Feather." She grinned at me and then went serious. "If Ariaura was doing it on purpose, why would she edit it out? And why did the emcee and the ushers look so uneasy?"

So she'd noticed that, too.

"Maybe she didn't warn them she was going to do it. Or, more likely, it's all part of the act, to make people believe it's authentic."

Kildy shook her head doubtfully. "I don't think so. I think it's something else."

"Like what? You don't think she's really channeling this guy?"

"No, of *course* not, Rob," she said indignantly. "It's just that . . . you say she's doing it to get publicity and bigger crowds, but as you told me, the first rule of success in the psychic business is to tell people what they want to hear, not to call them boobs. You saw the woman next to you—she was all ready to walk out, and I watched her afterward. She didn't sign up for a private enlightenment audience, and neither did very many other people, and I heard the emcee telling someone there were lots of tickets still available for the next seminar. Last week's was sold out a month in advance. Why would she do something to hurt her business?"

"She's got to do something to up the ante, to keep the customers coming back, and this new spirit is to create buzz. You watch, next week she'll be advertising 'The Battle of the Ancients.' It's a gimmick, Kildy."

"So you don't think we should go see her again."

"*No*. That's the worst thing we could possibly do. We don't want to give her free publicity, and if she did do it to impress us, though it doesn't sound like it, we'd be playing right into her hands. If she's not, and the spirit *is* driving customers away, like you say, she'll dump it and come up with a different one. Or put herself out of business. Either way, there's no need for us to do anything. It's a non-story. You can forget all about her."

Which just goes to show you why I could never make it as a psychic. Because before the words were even out of my mouth, the office door banged open, and Ariaura roared in and grabbed me by the lapels.

"I don't know what you're doing or how you're doing it!" she screamed, "but I want you to stop it right now!"

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"He has a large and extremely uncommon capacity for provocative utterance. . . ."

—H.L. Mencken

I hadn't given Ariaura's acting skills enough credit. Her portrayal of Isus might be wooden and fakey, but she gave a pretty convincing portrayal of a hopping-mad psychic.

"How *dare* you!" she shrieked. "I'll sue you for everything you own!"

She had changed out of her flowing robes and into a lilac-colored suit Kildy told me later was a Zac Posen, and her diamond-studded necklace and earrings rattled. She was practically vibrating with rage, though not the positive vibrations she'd said were necessary for the appearance of spirits.

"I just watched the video of my seminar," she shrieked, her face two inches from mine. "How *dare* you hypnotize me and make me look like a complete fool in front of—"

"Hypnotize?" Kildy said. (I was too busy trying to loosen her grip on my lapels to say anything.) "You think Rob hypnotized you?"

"Oh, don't play the innocent with me," Ariaura said, wheeling on her. "I saw you two out there in the audience today, and I know all about you and your nasty, sneering little magazine. I know you nonbelievers will stop at nothing to keep us from spreading the Higher Truth, but I didn't think you'd go this far, hypnotizing me against my will and making me say those things! Isus told me I shouldn't let you stay in the auditorium, that he sensed danger in your reality, but I said, 'No, let the unbelievers stay and experience your presence. Let them know you come from the Existence Beyond to help us, to bring us words of Higher Wisdom,' but Isus was right, you were up to no good."

She removed one hand from a lapel long enough to shake a lilac-lacquered fingernail at me. "Well, your little hypnotism scheme won't work. I've worked too hard to get where I am, and I'm not going to let a pair of narrow-minded little unbelievers like you get in my way. I have no intention—Higher Wisdom, my foot!" she snorted. "Higher Humbug is what I call it."

Kildy glanced, startled, at me.

"Oh, the trappings are a lot gaudier, I'll give you that," Ariaura said in the gravelly voice we'd heard at the seminar.

As before, the change had come without a break and in midsentence. One minute she had had me by the lapels, and the next she'd let go and was pacing around the room, her hands behind her back, musing, "That auditorium's a lot fancier, and it's a big improvement over a courthouse lawn, and a good forty degrees cooler." She sat down on the couch, her hands on her spread-apart knees. "And those duds she wears would make a grand worthy bow-wow of the Knights of Zoroaster look dowdy, but it's the same old line of buncombe and the same old Boobus Americanus drinking it in."

Kildy took a careful step toward my desk, reached for her handbag and did something I couldn't see, and then went back to where she'd been standing, keeping her eyes the whole time on Ariaura, who was holding forth about the seminar.

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"I never saw such an assortment of slack-jawed simians in one place! Except for the fact that the yokels have to sit on the floor—*and* pay for the privilege!—it's the spitting image of a Baptist tent revival. Tell 'em what they want to hear, do a couple of parlor tricks, and then pass the collection plate. And they're still falling for it!" She stood up and began pacing again. "I knew I should've stuck around. It's just like that time in Dayton—I think it's all over and leave, and look what happens! You let the quacks and the crooks take over, like this latter-day Aimee Semple McPherson. She's no more a seer than—of allowing you to ruin everything I've worked for! I . . ." She looked around bewilderedly. ". . . what? . . . I . . ." She faltered to a stop.

I had to hand it to her. She was good. She'd switched back into her own voice without missing a beat, and then given an impressive impersonation of someone who had no idea what was going on.

She looked confusedly from me to Kildy and back. "It happened again, didn't it?" she asked, a quaver in her voice, and turned to appeal to Kildy. "He did it again, didn't he?" and began backing toward the door. "*Didn't* he?"

She pointed accusingly at me. "You keep *away* from me!" she shrieked. "And you keep away from my seminars! If you so much as *try* to come near me again, I'll get a restraining order against you!" she said and roared out, slamming the door behind her.

"Well," Kildy said after a minute. "That was interesting."

"Yes," I said, looking at the door. "Interesting."

Kildy went over to my desk and pulled the Hasaka out from behind her handbag. "I got it all," she said, taking out the disk, sticking it in the computer dock, and sitting down in front of the monitor. "There were a lot more clues this time." She began typing in commands. "There should be more than enough for us to be able to figure out who it is."

"I know who it is," I said.

Kildy stopped in mid-keystroke. "Who?"

"The High Priest of Irreverence."

"*Who?*"

"The Holy Terror from Baltimore, the Apostle of Common Sense, the Scourge of Con Men, Creationists, Faith-Healers, and the Booboisie," I said. "Henry Louis Mencken."

"In brief, it is a fraud."

—H.L. Mencken

"H.L. Mencken?" Kildy said. "The reporter who covered the Scopes trial?" (I told you she was too good to be true.)

"But why would Ariaura channel him?" she asked after we'd checked the words and phrases we'd listed against Mencken's writings. They all checked out, from "buncombe" to "slackjawed simians" to "home of the imbecile and the ass."

"What did he mean about leaving Dayton early? Did something happen in Ohio?"

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I shook my head. "Tennessee. Dayton was where the Scopes trial was held."

"And Mencken left early?"

"I don't know," I said, and went over to the bookcase to look for *The Great Monkey Trial*, "but I know it got so hot during the trial they moved it outside."

"That's what that comment about the courthouse lawn and its being forty degrees cooler meant," Kildy said.

I nodded. "It was a hundred and five degrees and 90 percent humidity the week of the trial. It's definitely Mencken. He invented the term 'Boobus Americanus.'"

"But why would Ariaura channel H.L. Mencken, Rob? He *hated* people like her, didn't he?"

"He certainly did." He'd been the bane of charlatans and quacks all through the twenties, writing scathing columns on all kinds of scams, from faith-healing to chiropractic to creationism, railing incessantly against all forms of "hocus-pocus" and on behalf of science and rational thought.

"Then why would she channel him?" Kildy asked. Why not somebody sympathetic to psychics, like Edgar Cayce or Madame Blavatsky?"

"Because they'd obviously be suspect. By channeling an enemy of psychics, she makes it seem more credible."

"But nobody's ever heard of him."

"You have. I have."

"But nobody else in Ariaura's audience has."

"Exactly," I said, still looking for *The Great Monkey Trial*.

"You mean you think she's doing it to impress us?"

"Obviously," I said, scanning the titles. "Why else would she have come all the way over here to give that little performance?"

"But—what about the Seattle seminar? Or the one in Berkeley?"

"Dry runs. Or she was hoping we'd hear about them and go see her. Which we did."

"I didn't," Kildy said. "I went because my publicist wanted me to."

"But you go to lots of spiritualist events, and you talk to lots of people. Your publicist was there. Even if you hadn't gone, she'd have told you about it."

"But what would be the point? You're a skeptic. You don't believe in channeling. Would she honestly think she could convince you Mencken was real?"

"Maybe," I said. "She's obviously gone to a lot of trouble to make the spirit sound like him. And think what a coup that would be. 'Skeptic Says Channeled Spirit Authentic'? Have you ever heard of Uri Geller? He made a splash back in the seventies by claiming to bend spoons with his mind. He got all kinds of attention when a pair of scientists from the Stanford Research Institute said it wasn't a trick, that he was actually doing it."

"Was he?"

"No, of course not, and eventually he was exposed as a fraud. By Johnny Carson. Geller made the mistake of going on the *Tonight Show* and doing it in front of him. He'd apparently forgotten Carson had been a magician in

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his early days. But the point is, he made it onto the *Tonight Show.* And what made him a celebrity was having the endorsement of reputable scientists."

"And if you endorsed Ariaura, if you said you thought it was really Mencken, she'd be a celebrity, too."

"Exactly."

"So what do we do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? You're not going to try to expose her as a fake?"

"Channeling isn't the same as bending spoons. There's no independently verifiable evidence." I looked at her. "It's not worth it, and we've got bigger fish to fry. Like Charles Fred. He's making *way* too much money for a medium who only charges two hundred a performance, and he has way too many hits for a cold-reader. We need to find out how he's doing it, and where the money's coming from."

"But shouldn't we at least go to Ariaura's next seminar to see if it happens again?" Kildy persisted.

"And have to explain to the L.A. *Times* reporter who just happens to be there why we're so interested in Ariaura?" I said. "And why you came back three times?"

"I suppose you're right. But what if some other skeptic endorses her? Or some English professor?"

I hadn't thought of that. Ariaura had dangled the bait at four seminars we knew of. She might have been doing it at more, and *The Skeptical Mind* was in Seattle, Carlyle Drew was in San Francisco, and there were any number of amateur skeptics who went to spiritualist events.

And they would all know who Mencken was. He was the critical thinker's favorite person, next to the Amazing Randi and Houdini. He'd not only been fearless in his attacks on superstition and fraud, he could write "like a bat out of hell." And, unlike the rest of us skeptics, people had actually listened to what he said.

I'd liked him ever since I'd read about him chatting with somebody in his office at the Baltimore *Sun* and then suddenly looking out the window, saying, "The sons of bitches are gaining on us!" and frantically beginning to type. That was how I felt about twice a day, and more than once I'd muttered to myself, "Where the hell is Mencken when we need him?"

And I'd be willing to bet there were other people who felt the same way I did, who might be seduced by Mencken's language and the fact that Ariaura was telling them exactly what they wanted to hear.

"You're right," I said. "We need to look into this, but we should send somebody else to the seminar."

"How about my publicist? She said she wanted to go again."

"No, I don't want it to be anybody connected with us."

"I know just the person," Kildy said, snatching up her cell phone. "Her name's Riata Starr. She's an actress."

With a name like that, what else could she be?

"She's between jobs right now," Kildy said, punching in a number, "and if I tell her there's likely to be a casting director there, she'll definitely do it for us."

"Does she believe in channelers?"

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She looked pityingly at me. "Everyone in Hollywood believes in channelers, but it won't matter." She put the phone to her ear. "I'll put a videocam on her, and a recorder," she whispered. "And I'll tell her an undercover job would look great on her acting resume. Hello?" she said in a normal voice. "I'm trying to reach Riata Starr. Oh. No, no message."

She pushed "end." "She's at a casting call at Miramax." She stuck the phone in her bag, fished her keys out of its depths, and slung the bag over her shoulder. "I'm going to go out there and talk to her. I'll be back," she said and went out.

Definitely too good to be true, I thought, watching her leave, and called up a friend of mine in the police department and asked him what they had on Ariaura.

He promised he'd call me back, and while I was waiting I looked for and found *The Great Monkey Trial*. I looked up Mencken in the index and started through the references to see when Mencken had left Dayton. I doubted if he would have left before the trial was over. He'd been having the time of his life, pillorying William Jennings Bryan and the creationists. Maybe the reference was to Mencken's having left before Bryan's death. Bryan had died five days after the trial ended, presumably from a heart attack, but more likely from the humiliation he'd suffered at the hands of Clarence Darrow, who'd put him on the stand and fired questions at him about the Bible. Darrow had made him, and creationism, look ridiculous, or rather, Bryan had made himself look ridiculous. The cross-examination had been the high point of the trial, and it had killed him.

Mencken had written a deadly, unforgiving eulogy of Bryan, and he might very well have been sorry he hadn't been in at the kill, but I couldn't imagine Ariaura knowing that, even if she had taken the trouble to look up "Boobus Americanus" and "unmitigated bilge," and research Mencken's gravelly voice and explosive delivery.

Of course she might have read it. In this very book, even. I read the chapter on Bryan's death, looking for references to Mencken, but I couldn't find any. I backtracked, and there it was. And I couldn't believe it. He hadn't left after the trial. When Darrow's expert witnesses had all been disallowed, Mencken had assumed that the trial was all over except for assorted legal technicalities and had gone back to Baltimore. Mencken hadn't seen Darrow's withering cross-examination. He'd missed Bryan saying man wasn't a mammal, his insisting the sun could stand still without throwing the earth out of orbit. He'd definitely left too soon. And I was willing to bet he'd never forgiven himself for it.

"To me, the scientific point of view is completely satisfying, and it has been so as long as I remember. Not once in this life have I ever been inclined to seek a rock and refuge elsewhere."

—H.L. Mencken

"But how could Ariaura know that?" Kildy said when she got back from the casting call.

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"The same way I know it. She read it in a book. Did your friend Riata agree to go to the seminar?"

"Yes, she said she'd go. I gave her the Hasaka, but I'm worried they might confiscate it, so I've got an appointment with this props guy at Universal who worked on the last Bond movie to see if he's got any ideas."

"Uh, Kildy . . . those gadgets James Bond uses aren't real. It's a movie."

She shot me her Julia-Roberts-plus smile. "I said *ideas*. Oh, and I got Riata's ticket. When I called, I asked if they were sold out, and the guy I talked to said, 'Are you kidding?' and told me they'd only sold about half what they usually do. Did you find out anything about Ariaura?"

"No," I said. "I'm checking out some leads," but my friend at the police department didn't have any dope on Ariaura, not even a possible alibi.

"She's clean," he said when he finally called back the next morning. "No mail fraud, not even a parking ticket."

I couldn't find anything on her in *The Skeptical Mind* or on the Scamwatch website. It looked like she made her money the good old American way, by telling her customers a bunch of nonsense and selling them chakra charts.

I told Kildy as much when she came in, looking gorgeous in a casual shirt and jeans that had probably cost as much as *The Jaundiced Eye*'s annual budget.

"Ariaura's obviously not her real name, but so far I haven't been able to find out what it is," I said. "Did you get a James Bond secret videocam from your buddy Q?"

"Yes," she said, setting the tote bag down. "And I have an idea for proving Ariaura's a fraud." She handed me a sheaf of papers. "Here are the transcripts of everything Mencken said. We check them against Mencken's writings, and—what?"

I was shaking my head. "This is channeling. When I wrote an exposé about Swami Vishnu Jammi's fifty-thousand-year-old entity, Yogati, using phrases like 'totally awesome' and 'funky' and talking about cell phones, he said he 'transliterated' Yogati's thoughts into his own words."

"Oh." Kildy bit her lip. "Rob, what about a computer match? You know, one of those things where they compare a manuscript with Shakespeare's plays to see if they were written by the same person."

"Too expensive," I said. "Besides, they're done by universities, who I doubt would want to risk their credibility by running a check on a channeler. And even if they did match, all it would prove is that it's Mencken's words, not that it's Mencken."

"Oh." She sat on the corner of my desk, swinging her long legs for a minute, and then stood up, walked over to the bookcase, and began pulling down books.

"What are you doing?" I asked, going over to see what she was doing. She was holding a copy of Mencken's *Heathen Days*. "I told you," I said, "Mencken's phrases won't—"

"I'm not looking up his phrases," she said, handing me *Prejudices* and Mencken's biography. "I'm looking for questions to ask him."

"*Him*? He's not Mencken, Kildy. He's a concoction of Ariaura's."

"I know," she said, handing me *The Collectible Mencken*. "That's why we

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need to question him—I mean Ariaura. We need to ask him—her—questions like, 'What was your wife's maiden name?' and 'What was the first newspaper you worked for?' and—are any of these paperbacks on the bottom shelf here by Mencken?"

"No, they're mysteries mostly. Chandler and Hammett and James M. Cain."

She straightened to look at the middle shelves. "Questions like, 'What did your father do for a living?'"

"He made cigars," I said. "The first newspaper he worked for wasn't the Baltimore *Sun*, it was the *Morning Herald*, and his wife's maiden name was Sarah Haardt. With a 'd' and two 'a's.' But that doesn't mean I'm Mencken."

"No," Kildy said, "but if you didn't know them, it would prove you weren't." She handed me *A Mencken Chrestomathy*. "If we ask Ariaura questions Mencken would know the answers to, and she gets them wrong, it proves she's faking."

She had a point. Ariaura had obviously researched Mencken fairly thoroughly to be able to mimic his language and mannerisms, and probably well enough to answer basic questions about his life, but she would hardly have memorized every detail. There were dozens of books about him, let alone his own work and his diaries. And *Inherit the Wind* and all the other plays and books and treatises that had been written about the Scopes trial. I'd bet there were close to a hundred Mencken things in print, and that didn't include the stuff he'd written for the Baltimore *Sun*.

And if we could catch her not knowing something Mencken would know, it would be a simple way to prove conclusively that she was faking, and we could move on to the much more important question of why. *If* Ariaura would let herself be questioned.

"How do you plan to get Ariaura to agree to this?" I said. "My guess is she won't even let us in to see her."

"If she doesn't, then that's proof, too," she said imperturbably.

"All right," I said, "but forget about asking what Mencken's father did. Ask what he drank. Rye, by the way."

Kildy grabbed a notebook and started writing.

"Ask what the name of his first editor at the *Sun* was," I said, picking up *The Great Monkey Trial*. "And ask who Sue Hicks was."

"Who was she?" Kildy asked.

"He. He was one of the defense lawyers at the Scopes trial."

"Should we ask him—her what the Scopes trial was about?"

"No, too easy. Ask him . . ." I said, trying to think of a good question. "Ask him what he ate while he was there covering the trial, and ask him where he sat in the courtroom."

"Where he sat?"

"It's a trick question. He stood on a table in the corner. Oh, and ask where he was born."

She frowned. "Isn't that too easy? Everyone knows he's from Baltimore."

"I want to hear him say it."

"Oh," Kildy said, nodding. "Did he have any kids?"

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I shook my head. "He had a sister and two brothers. Gertrude, Charles, and August."

"Oh, good, August's not a name you'd be able to come up with just by guessing. Did he have any hobbies?"

"He played the piano. Ask about the Saturday Night Club. He and a bunch of friends got together to play music."

We worked on the questions the rest of the day and the next morning, writing them down on index cards so they could be asked out of order.

"What about some of his sayings?" Kildy asked.

"You mean like, 'Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy?' No. They're the easiest thing of all to memorize, and no real person speaks in aphorisms."

Kildy nodded and bent her beautiful head over the book again. I looked up Mencken's medical history—he suffered from ulcers and had had an operation on his mouth to remove his uvula—and went out and got us sandwiches for lunch and made copies of Mencken's "History of the Bathtub" and a fake handbill he'd passed out during the Scopes trial announcing "a public demonstration of healing, casting out devils, and prophesying" by a (made-up) evangelist. Mencken had crowed that not a single person in Dayton had spotted the fake.

Kildy looked up from her book. "Did you know Mencken dated Lillian Gish?" she asked, sounding surprised.

"Yeah. He dated a lot of actresses. He had an affair with Anita Loos and nearly married Aileen Pringle. Why?"

"I'm impressed he wasn't intimidated by the fact that they were movie stars, that's all."

I didn't know if that was directed at me or not. "Speaking of actresses," I said, "what time is Ariaura's seminar?"

"Two o'clock," she said, glancing at her watch. "It's a quarter till two right now. It should be over around four. Riata said she'd call as soon as the seminar was done."

We went back to looking through Mencken's books and his biographies, looking for details Ariaura was unlikely to have memorized. He'd loved baseball. He had stolen Gideon Bibles from hotel rooms and then given them to his friends, inscribed, "Compliments of the Author." He'd been friends with lots of writers, including Theodore Dreiser and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who'd gotten so drunk at a dinner with Mencken he'd stood up at the dinner table and pulled his pants down.

The phone rang. I reached for it, but it was Kildy's cell phone. "It's Riata," she told me, looking at the readout.

"Riata?" I glanced at my watch. It was only two-thirty. "Why isn't she in the seminar?"

Kildy shrugged and put the phone to her ear. "Riata? What's going on? . . . You're kidding! . . . Did you get it? Great . . . no, meet me at Spago's, like we agreed. I'll be there in half an hour."

She hit 'end,' stood up, and took out her keys, all in one graceful motion. "Ariaura did it again, only this time as soon as she started, they stopped the seminar, yanked her off-stage, and told everybody to leave. Riata got it on tape. I'm going to go pick it up. Will you be here?"

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I nodded absently, trying to think of a way to ask about Mencken's two-fingered typing, and Kildy waved goodbye and went out.

If I asked "How do you write your stories?" I'd get an answer about the process of writing, but if I asked, "Do you touch-type?" Ariaura—

Kildy reappeared in the doorway, sat down, and picked up her notebook again. "What are you doing?" I asked, "I thought you were—"

She put her finger to her lips. "She's here," she mouthed, and Ariaura came in.

She was still wearing her purple robes and her stage makeup, so she must have come here straight from her seminar, but she didn't roar in angrily the way she had before. She looked frightened.

"What are you doing to me?" she asked, her voice trembling, "and don't say you're not doing anything. I saw the videotape. You're—that's what I want to know, too," the gravelly voice demanded. "What the hell have you been doing? I thought you ran a magazine that worked to put a stop to the kind of bilgewater this high priestess of blather spews out. She was at it again today, calling up spirits and rooking a bunch of mysticism-besotted fools out of their cold cash, and where the hell were you? I didn't see you there, cracking heads."

"We didn't go because we didn't want to encourage her if she was—" Kildy hesitated. "We're not sure what . . . I mean, who we're dealing with here. . . ." she faltered.

"Ariaura," I said firmly. "You pretend to channel spirits from the astral plane for a living. Why should we believe you're not pretending to channel H.L. Mencken?"

"Pretending?" she said, sounding surprised. "You think I'm something that two-bit Jezebel's confabulating?" She sat down heavily in the chair in front of my desk and grinned wryly at me. "You're absolutely right. I wouldn't believe it either. A skeptic after my own heart."

"Yes," I said. "And as a skeptic, I need to have some proof you're who you say you are."

"Fair enough. What kind of proof?"

"We want to ask you some questions," Kildy said.

Ariaura slapped her knees. "Fire away."

"All right," I said. "Since you mentioned fires, when was the Baltimore fire?"

"Aught-four," she said promptly. "February. Cold as hell." She grinned. "Best time I ever had."

Kildy glanced at me.

"What did your father drink?" she asked.

"Rye."

"What did you drink?" I asked.

"From 1919 on, whatever I could get."

"Where are you from?" Kildy asked.

"The most beautiful city in the world."

"Which is?" I said.

"Which *is?*" she roared, outraged. "Bawlmer!"

Kildy shot me a glance. "What's the Saturday Night Club?" I barked.

"A drinking society," she said, "with musical accompaniment."

"What instrument did you play?"

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"Piano."

"What's the Mann Act?"

"Why?" she said, winking at Kildy. "You planning on taking her across state lines? Is she underage?"

I ignored that. "If you're really Mencken, you hate charlatans, so why have you inhabited Ariaura's body?"

"Why do people go to zoos?"

She was good, I had to give her that. And fast. She spat out answers as fast as I could ask questions about the *Sun* and the *Smart Set* and William Jennings Bryan.

"Why did you go to Dayton?"

"To see a three-ring circus. And stir up the animals."

"What did you take with you?"

"A typewriter and four quarts of Scotch. I should have taken a fan. It was hotter than the seventh circle of hell, with the same company."

"What did you eat while you were there?" Kildy asked.

"Fried chicken and tomatoes. At every meal. Even breakfast."

I handed her the bogus evangelist handbill Mencken had handed out at the Scopes trial. "What's this?"

She looked at it, turned it over, looked at the other side. "It appears to be some sort of circular."

And there's all the proof we need, I thought smugly. Mencken would have recognized that instantly. "Do you know who wrote this handbill?" I started to ask and thought better of it. The question itself might give the answer away. And better not use the word "handbill."

"Do you know the event this circular describes?" I asked instead.

"I'm afraid I can't answer that," she said.

Then you're not Mencken, I thought. I shot a triumphant glance at Kildy.

"But I would be glad to," Ariaura said, "if you would be so good as to read what is written on it to me."

She handed the handbill back to me, and I stood there looking at it and then at her and then at it again.

"What is it, Rob?" Kildy said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said. "Never mind about the circular. What was your first published news story about?"

"A stolen horse and buggy," she said and proceeded to tell the whole story, but I wasn't listening.

He didn't know who the handbill was about, I thought, because he couldn't read. Because he'd had an aphasic stroke in 1948 that had left him unable to read and write.

"I had a nice clean place to stay, madam, and I left it to come here."
—Inherit the Wind

"It doesn't prove anything," I told Kildy after Ariaura was gone. She'd come out of her Mencken act abruptly after I'd asked her what street she lived on in Baltimore, looked bewilderedly at me and then Kildy, and

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bolted without a word. "Ariaura could have found out about Mencken's stroke the same way I did," I said, "by reading it in a book."

"Then why did you go white like that?" Kildy said. "I thought you were going to pass out. And why wouldn't she just answer the question? She knew the answers to all the others."

"Probably she didn't know that one and that was her fallback response," I said. "It caught me off-guard, that's all. I was expecting her to have memorized pat answers, not—"

"Exactly," Kildy cut in. "Somebody faking it would have said they had an aphasic stroke if you asked them a direct question about it, but they wouldn't have . . . and that wasn't the only instance. When you asked him about the Baltimore fire, he said it was the best time he'd ever had. Someone faking it would have told you what buildings burned or how horrible it was."

And he'd said, not "1904" or "oh-four," but "aught-four." Nobody talked like that nowadays, and it wasn't something that would have been in Mencken's writings. It was something people said, not wrote, and Ariaura couldn't possibly—

"It doesn't prove he's Mencken," I said and realized I was saying "he." And shouting. I lowered my voice. "It's a very clever trick, that's all. And just because we don't know how the trick's being done doesn't mean it's not a trick. She could have been coached in the part, *including* telling her how to pretend she can't read if she's confronted with anything written, or she could be hooked up to somebody with a computer."

"I looked. She wasn't wearing an earpiece, and if somebody was looking up the answers and feeding them to her, she'd be slower answering them, wouldn't she?"

"Not necessarily. She might have a photographic memory."

"But then wouldn't she be doing a mind-reading act instead of channeling?"

"Maybe she did. We don't know what she was doing before Salem," I said, but Kildy was right. Someone with a photographic memory could make a killing as a fortuneteller or a medium, and there were no signs of a photographic memory in Ariaura's channeling act—she spoke only in generalities.

"Or she might be coming up with the answers some other way," I said.

"What if she isn't, Rob? What if she's really channeling the spirit of Mencken?"

"Kildy, channelers are fakes. There are no spirits, no sympathetic vibrations, no astral plane."

"I know," she said, "but his answers were so—" She shook her head. "And there's something about him, his voice and the way he moves—"

"It's called acting."

"But Ariaura's a terrible actress. You saw her do Isus."

"All right," I said. "Let's suppose for a minute it is Mencken, and that instead of being in the family plot in Louden Park Cemetery, his spirit's floating in the ether somewhere, why would he come back at this particular moment? Why didn't he come back when Uri Geller was bending spoons all over the place, or when Shirley MacLaine was on every talk

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show in the universe? Why didn't he come back in the fifties when Virginia Tighe was claiming to be Bridey Murphy?"

"I don't know," Kildy admitted.

"And why would he choose to make his appearance through the 'channel' of a third-rate mountebank like Ariaura? He *hated* charlatans like her."

"Maybe that's why he came back, because people like her are still around and he hadn't finished what he set out to do. You heard him—he said he left too early."

"He was talking about the Scopes trial."

"Maybe not. You heard him, he said 'You let the quacks and the crooks take over.' Or maybe—" she stopped.

"Maybe what?"

"Maybe he came back to help you, Rob. That time you were so frustrated over Charles Fred, I heard you say, 'Where the hell is H.L. Mencken when we need him?' Maybe he heard you."

"And decided to come all the way back from an astral plane that doesn't exist to help a skeptic nobody's ever heard of."

"It's not *that* inconceivable that someone would be interested in you," Kildy said. "I . . . I mean, the work you're doing is really important, and Mencken—"

"*Kildy*," I said. "I don't believe this."

"I don't either—I just . . . you have to admit, it's a very convincing illusion."

"Yes, so was the Fox Sisters' table-rapping and Virginia Tighe's past life as an Irish washerwoman in 1880s Dublin, but there was a logical explanation for both of them, and it may not even be that complicated. The details Bridey Murphy knew all turned out to have come from Virginia Tighe's Irish nanny. The Fox Sisters were cracking their *toes*, for God's sake."

"You're right," Kildy said, but she didn't sound completely convinced, and that worried me. If Ariaura's Mencken imitation could fool Kildy, it could fool anybody, and "I'm sure it's a trick. I just don't know how she's doing it," wasn't going to cut it when the networks called me for a statement. I had to figure this out fast.

"Ariaura has to be getting her information about Mencken from someplace," I said. "We need to find out where. We need to check with bookstores and the library. And the Internet," I said, hoping that wasn't what she was using. It would take forever to find out what sites she'd visited.

"What do you want me to do?" Kildy asked.

"I want you to go through the transcripts like you suggested and find out where the quotes came from so we'll know the particular works we're dealing with," I told her. "And I want you to talk to your publicist and anybody else who's been to the seminars and find out if any of them had a private enlightenment audience with Ariaura. I want to know what goes on in them. Is she using Mencken for some purpose we don't know about? See if you can find out."

"I could ask Riata to get one," she suggested.

"That's a good idea," I said.

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"What about questions? Do you want me to try to come up with some harder ones than the ones we asked him—I mean, her?"

I shook my head. "Asking harder questions won't help. If she's got a photographic memory, she'll know anything we throw at her, and if she doesn't, and we ask her some obscure question about one of the reporters Mencken worked with at the *Morning Herald*, or one of his *Smart Set* essays, she can say she doesn't remember, and it won't prove anything. If you asked me what was in articles I wrote for *The Jaundiced Eye* five years ago, I couldn't remember either."

"I'm not talking about facts and figures, Rob," Kildy said. "I'm talking about the kinds of things people don't forget, like the first time Mencken met Sara."

I thought of the first time I met Kildy, looking up from my desk to see her standing there, with her blonde hair and that movie-star smile. Unforgettable was the word, all right.

"Or how his mother died," Kildy was saying, "or how he found out about the Baltimore fire. The paper called him and woke him out of a sound sleep. There's no way you could forget that, or the name of a dog you had as a kid, or the nickname the other kids called you in grade school."

Nickname. That triggered something. Something Ariaura wouldn't know. About a baby. Had Mencken had a nickname when he was a baby? No, that wasn't it—

"Or what he got for Christmas when he was ten," Kildy said. "We need to find a question Mencken would absolutely know the answer to, and if he doesn't, it proves it's Ariaura."

"And if he does, it still doesn't prove it's Mencken. Right?"

"I'll go talk to Riata about getting a private audience," she said, stuffed the transcripts in her tote, and put on her sunglasses. "And I'll pick up the videotape. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"Right, Kildy?" I insisted.

"Right," she said, her hand on the door. "I guess."

"In the highest confidence there is always a flavor of doubt—a feeling, half instinctive and half logical, that, after all, the scoundrel may have something up his sleeve."

—H.L. Mencken

After Kildy left, I called up a computer-hacker friend of mine and put him to work on the problem and then phoned a guy I knew in the English department at UCLA.

"Inquiries about Mencken?" he said. "Not that I know of, Rob. You might try the journalism department."

The guy at the journalism department said, "Who?" and, when I explained, suggested I call Johns Hopkins in Baltimore.

And what had I been thinking? Kildy said Ariaura had started doing Mencken in Seattle. I needed to be checking there, or in Salem or—where had she gone after that? Sedona. I spent the rest of the day (and evening)

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calling bookstores and reference librarians in all three places. Five of them responded "Who?" and all of them asked me how to spell 'Mencken,' which might or might not mean they hadn't heard the name lately, and only seven of the thirty stores stocked any books on him. Half of those were the latest Mencken biography, which for an excited moment I thought might have answered the question, "Why Mencken?" (the title of it was *Skeptic and Prophet*), but it had only been out two weeks. None of the bookstores could give me any information on orders or recent purchases, and the public libraries couldn't give me any information at all.

I tried their electronic card catalogues, but they only showed currently checked-out books. I called up the L.A. Public Library's catalogue. It showed four Mencken titles checked out, all from the Beverly Hills branch.

"Which looks promising," I told Kildy when she came in the next morning.

"No, it doesn't," she said. "I'm the one who checked them out, to compare the transcripts against." She pulled a sheaf of papers out of her designer tote. "I need to talk to you about the transcripts. I found something interesting. I know," she said, anticipating my objection, "you said all it proved was that Ariaura—"

"Or whoever's feeding this stuff to her."

She acknowledged that with a nod, "—all it proved was that whoever was doing it was reading Mencken, and I agree, but you'd expect her to quote him back verbatim, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," I said, thinking of Randall Mars's Lincoln and his "Fourscore and seven . . ."

"But she doesn't. Look, here's what she said when we asked him about William Jennings Bryan: 'Bryan! I don't even want to hear that mangy old mountebank's name mentioned. That scoundrel had a malignant hatred of science and sense.'"

"And he didn't say that?"

"Yes and no. Mencken called him a 'walking malignancy' and said he was 'mangy and flea-bitten' and had 'an almost pathological hatred of all learning.' And the rest of the answers, and the things she said at the seminars, are like that, too."

"So she mixed and matched his phrases," I said, but what she'd found was disturbing. Someone trying to pull off an impersonation would stick to the script, since any deviations from Mencken's actual words could be used as proof it wasn't him.

And the annotated list Kildy handed me was troubling in another way. The phrases hadn't been taken from one or two sources. They were from all over the map— "complete hooey" from *Minority Report*, "buncombe" from *The New Republic*, "as truthful as Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound" from an article on pedagogy in the *Sun*.

"Could they all have been in a Mencken biography?"

She shook her head. "I checked. I found a couple of sources that had several of them, but no one source that had them all."

"That doesn't mean there isn't one," I said and changed the subject. "Was your friend able to get a private audience with Ariaura?"

"Yes," she said, glancing at her watch. "I have to go meet her in a few minutes. She also got tickets to the seminar Saturday. They didn't cancel

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it like I thought they would, but they did cancel a local radio interview she was supposed to do last night, and the week-long spiritual immersion she had scheduled for next week."

"Did she give you the recording of Ariaura's last seminar?"

"No, she'd left it at home. She said she'd bring it when we meet before her private audience. She said she got some really good footage of the emcee. She swears from the way he looked that he's not in on the scam. And there's something else. I called Judy Helzberg, who goes to every psychic event there is—Remember? I interviewed her when we did the piece on shamanic astrologers—and she said Ariaura called her and asked her for Wilson Amboy's number."

"Wilson Amboy?"

"Beverly Hills psychiatrist."

"It's all part of the illusion," I said, but even I sounded a little doubtful. It was an awfully good deception for a third-rate channeler like Ariaura. There's somebody else in on it, I thought, and not just somebody feeding her answers. A partner. A mastermind.

After Kildy left I called Marty Rumboldt and asked him if Ariaura had had a partner in Salem. "Not that I know of," he said. "Prentiss just did a study on witchcraft in Salem. She might know somebody who would know. Hang on. Hey, Prentiss!" I could hear him call. "Jamie!"

Jamie, I thought. That had been James M. Cain's nickname, and Mencken had been good friends with him. Where had I read that?

"She said to call Madame Orima," Marty said, getting back on the phone, and gave me the number.

I started to dial it and then stopped and looked up "Cain, James M." in Mencken's biography. It said he and Mencken had worked on the Baltimore *Sun* together, that they had been good friends, that Mencken had helped him get his first story collection published: *The Baby in the Icebox.*

I went over to the bookcase, squatted down, and started through the row of paperbacks on the bottom shelf . . . Chandler, Hammett . . . It had a red cover, with a picture of a baby in a high chair and a . . . Chandler, Cain . . .

But no red. I scanned the titles—*Double Indemnity*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* . . . Here it was, stuck behind *Mildred Pierce* and not red at all. *The Baby in the Icebox.* It was a lurid orange and yellow, with pictures of a baby in its mother's arms and a cigarette-smoking lug in front of a gas station. I hoped I remembered the inside better than the outside.

I did. The introduction was by Roy Hoopes, and it was not only a Penguin edition, but one that had been out of print for at least twenty years. Even if Ariaura's researcher had bothered to check out Cain, it would hardly have been this edition.

And the introduction was full of stuff about Cain that was perfect—the fact that everyone who knew him called him Jamie, the fact that he'd spent a summer in a tuberculosis sanitarium and hated Baltimore, Mencken's favorite place.

Some of the information was in the Mencken books—Mencken's introducing him to Alfred A. Knopf, who'd published that first collection, the *Sun* connection, Cain and Mencken's rivalry over movie star Aileen Pringle.

But most of the facts in the introduction weren't, and they were exactly

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the kind of thing a friend would know. And Ariaura wouldn't, because they were details about Cain's life, not Mencken's. Even a mastermind wouldn't have memorized every detail of Cain's life or those of Mencken's other famous friends. If there wasn't anything here I could use, there might be something in Dreiser's biography, or F. Scott Fitzgerald's. Or Lillian Gish's.

But there was plenty here, like the fact that Cain's brother Boydie had died in a tragic accident after the Armistice, and Cain's statement that all his writing was modeled on *Alice in Wonderland*. That was something no one would ever guess from reading Cain's books, which were all full of crimes and murderers and a beautiful, calculating woman who seduced the hero into helping her with a scam and then turned out to be working a scam of her own.

Not exactly the kind of thing Ariaura would read, and definitely the kind of thing Mencken would have. He'd bought "The Baby in the Icebox" for the *American Mercury* and told Cain it was one of the best things he'd ever written. Which meant it would make a perfect source for a question, and I knew just what to ask. To anyone who hadn't heard of the story, the question wouldn't even make sense. Only somebody who'd read the story would know the answer. Like Mencken.

And if Ariaura knew it, I'd—what? Believe she was actually channeling Mencken?

Right. And Charles Fred was really talking to the dead and Uri Geller was really bending spoons.

It was a trick, that was all. She had a photographic memory, or somebody was feeding her the answers.

Feeding her the answers.

I thought suddenly of Kildy, saying, "Who *was* Sue Hicks?," of her insisting I go with her to see Ariaura, of her saying, "But why would Ariaura channel a spirit who yells at her audiences?"

I looked down at the orange-and-yellow paperback in my hand. "A beautiful, calculating woman who seduces the hero into helping her with a scam," I murmured, and thought about Ariaura's movie-star-handsome ushers and about scantily clad Victorian spirits and about Sir William Crookes.

Sex. Get the chump emotionally involved and he won't see the wires. It was the oldest trick in the book.

I'd said Ariaura wasn't smart enough to pull off such a complicated scam, and she wasn't. But Kildy was. So you get her on the inside where she can see the shelf full of Mencken books, where she can hear the chump mutter, "Where the hell is Mencken when we need him?" You get the chump to trust her, and if he falls in love with her, so much the better. It'll keep him off-balance and he won't get suspicious.

And it all fit. It was Kildy who'd set up the contact—I never did channelers, and Kildy knew that. It was Kildy who'd said we couldn't go incognito, Kildy who'd said to bring the Sony, knowing it would be confiscated, Kildy who'd taken a taxi to the seminar instead of coming in her Jaguar so she'd be at the office when Ariaura came roaring in.

But she'd gotten all of it on tape. And she hadn't had any idea who the spirit was. I was the one who'd figured out it was Mencken.

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With Kildy feeding me clues from the seminar she'd gone to before, and I only had her word that Ariaura had channeled him that time. And that it had happened in Berkeley and Seattle. And that the tapes had been edited.

And she was the one who'd kept telling me it was really Mencken, the one who'd come up with the idea of asking him questions that would prove it—questions I'd conveniently told her the answers to—the one who'd suggested a friend of hers go to the seminar and videotape it, a videotape I'd never seen. I wondered if it—or Riata—even existed.

The whole thing, from beginning to end, had been a set-up.

And I had never tumbled to it. Because I'd been too busy looking at her legs and her hair and that smile. Just like Crookes.

I don't believe it, I thought. Not Kildy, who'd worked side-by-side with me for nearly a year, who'd stolen chicken guts and pretended to be hypnotized and let Jean-Piette cleanse her aura, who'd come to work for me in the first place because she hated scam-artists like Ariaura.

Right. Who'd come to work for a two-bit magazine when she could have been getting five million a movie and dating Viggo Mortensen. Who'd been willing to give up premieres and summers in Tahiti and deep massages for me. Skeptics' Rule Number Two: If it seems too good to be true, it is. And how often have you said she's a good actress?

No, I thought, every bone in my body rebelling. It can't be true.

And that's what the chump always says, isn't it, even when he's faced with the evidence? "I don't believe it. She wouldn't do that to me."

And that was the whole point—to get you to trust her, to make you believe she was on your side. Otherwise you'd have insisted on checking those tapes of Ariaura's seminars for yourself to see if they'd been edited, you'd have demanded independently verifiable evidence that Ariaura had really cancelled those seminars and asked about a psychiatrist.

Independently verifiable evidence. That's what I needed, and I knew exactly where to look.

"My mother took me to Lucius Windfire's luminescence reading," Kildy had said, and I had the guest lists for those readings. They were part of the court records, and I'd gotten them when I'd done the story on his arrest. Kildy had come to see me on May tenth and he'd only had two seminars that month.

I called up the lists for both seminars and for the two before that and typed in Kildy's name.

Nothing.

She said she went with her mother, I thought, and typed her mom's name in. Nothing. And nothing when I printed out the lists and went through them by hand, nothing when I went through the lists for March and April. And no ten thousand dollar donation on any of Windfire, Inc.'s financial statements.

Half an hour later Kildy showed up smiling, beautiful, full of news. "Ariaura's canceled all the private sessions she scheduled and the rest of her tour." She leaned over my shoulder to look at what I was doing. "Did you come up with a foolproof question for Mencken?"

"No," I said, sliding *The Baby in the Icebox* under a file folder and stick-

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ing them both in a drawer. "I came up with a theory about what's going on, though."

"Really?" she said.

"Really. You know, one of my big problems all along has been Ariaura. She's just not smart enough to have come up with all this—the 'aught-four' thing, the not being able to read, the going to see a psychiatrist. Which either meant she was actually channeling Mencken, or there was some other factor. And I think I've got it figured out."

"You have?"

"Yeah. Tell me what you think of this: Ariaura wants to be big. Not just seven-hundred-and-fifty a pop seminars and thirty-dollar videotapes, but *Oprah*, the *Today Show*, *Larry King*, the whole works. But to do that it's not enough to have audiences who believe her. She needs to have somebody with credibility say she's for real, a scientist, say, or a professional skeptic."

"Like you," she said cautiously.

"Like me. Only I don't believe in astral spirits. Or channelers. And I certainly wouldn't fall for the spirit of an ancient priest of Atlantis. It's going to have to be somebody a charlatan would never dream of channeling, somebody who'll say what I want to hear. And somebody I know a lot about so I'll recognize the clues being fed to me, somebody custom-tailored for me."

"Like H.L. Mencken," Kildy said. "But how would she have known you were a fan of Mencken's?"

"She didn't have to," I said. "That was her partner's job."

"Her part—"

"Partner, sidekick, shill, whatever you want to call it. Somebody I'd trust when she said it was important to go see some channeler."

"Let me get this straight," she said. "You think I went to Ariaura's seminar and her imitation of Isus was so impressive I immediately became a Believer with a capital B and fell in with her nefarious scheme, whatever it is?"

"No," I said. "I think you were in it with her from the beginning, from the very first day you came to work for me."

She really was a good actress. The expression in those beautiful blue eyes looked exactly like stunned hurt. "You believe I set you up," she said wonderingly.

I shook my head. "I'm a skeptic, remember? I deal in independently verifiable evidence. Like this," I said and handed her Lucius Windfire's attendee list.

She looked at it in silence.

"Your whole story about how you found out about me was a fake, wasn't it? You didn't look up 'debunkers' in the phone book, did you? You didn't go see a luminescence therapist with your mother?"

"No."

No.

I hadn't realized till she admitted it how much I had been counting on her saying, "There must be some mistake, I was there," on her having some excuse, no matter how phony: "Did I say the fourteenth? I meant the twentieth," or "My publicist got the tickets for us. It would be in her

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name." Anything. Even flinging the list dramatically at me and sobbing, "I can't believe you don't trust me."

But she just stood there, looking at the incriminatory list and then at me, not a tantrum or a tear in sight.

"You concocted the whole story," I said finally.

"Yes."

I waited for her to say, "It's not the way it looks, Rob, I can explain," but she didn't say that either. She handed the list back to me and picked up her cell phone and her bag, fishing for her keys and then slinging her bag over her shoulder as casually as if she were on her way to go cover a new moon ceremony or a tarot reading, and left.

And this was the place in the story where the private eye takes a bottle of Scotch out of his bottom drawer, pours himself a nice stiff drink, and congratulates himself on his narrow escape.

I'd almost been made a royal chump of, and Mencken (the real one, not the imitation Kildy and Ariaura had tried to pass off as him) would never have forgiven me. So good riddance. And what I needed to do now was write up the whole sorry scam as a lesson to other skeptics for the next issue.

But I sat there a good fifteen minutes, thinking about Kildy and her exit, and knowing that, in spite of its off-handedness, I was never going to see her again.

"What I need is a miracle."

—Inherit the Wind

I told you I'd make a lousy psychic. The next morning Kildy walked in carrying an armload of papers and file folders. She dumped them in front of me on my desk, picked up my phone, and began punching in numbers.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? And what's all this?" I said, gesturing at the stack of papers.

"Independently verifiable evidence," she said, still punching in numbers, and put the phone to her ear. "Hello, this is Kildy Ross. I need to speak to Ariaura." There was a pause. "She's not taking calls? All right, tell her I'm at *The Jaundiced Eye* office, and I need to speak to her as soon as possible. Tell her it's urgent. Thank you." She hung up.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, calling Ariaura on my phone?" I said.

"I wasn't," she said. "I was calling Mencken." She pulled a file out of the middle of the stack. "I'm sorry it took me so long. Getting Ariaura's phone records was harder than I thought."

"Ariaura's phone records?"

"Yeah. Going back four years," she said, pulling a file folder out of the middle of the stack and handing it to me.

I opened it up. "How did you get her phone records?"

"I know this computer guy at Pixar. We should do an issue on how easy it is to get hold of private information and how mediums are using it to

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convince people they're talking to their dead relatives," she said, fishing through the stack for another folder. "And here are my phone records." She handed it to me. "The cell's on top, and then my home number and my car phone. And my mom's. And my publicist's cell phone."

"Your publicist's cell—?"

She nodded. "In case you think I used her phone to call Ariaura. She doesn't have a regular phone, just a cell. And here are my dad's and my stepmother's. I can get my other stepmothers', too, but it'll take a couple more days, and Ariaura's big seminar is tonight."

She handed me more files. "This is a list of all my trips—airline tickets, hotel bills, rental car records. Credit card bills, with annotations," she said, and went over to her tote bag and pulled out three fat Italian-leather notebooks with a bunch of post-its sticking out the sides. "These are my dayplanners, with notes as to what the abbreviations mean, and my publicist's log."

"And this is supposed to prove you were at Lucius Windfire's luminescence reading with your mother?"

"No, Rob, I told you, I lied about the seminar," she said, looking earnestly through the stack, folder by folder. "These are to prove I didn't call Ariaura, that she didn't call me, that I wasn't in Seattle or Eugene or any of the other cities she was in, and never went to Salem." She pulled a folder out of the pile and began handing items to me. "Here's the program for Yogi Magaputra's matinee performance for May nineteenth. I couldn't find the ticket stubs and I didn't buy the tickets, the studio did, but here's a receipt for the champagne cocktail I had at intermission. See? It's got the date and it was at the Roosevelt, and here's a schedule of Magaputra's performances, showing he was at the Roosevelt on that day. And a flyer for the next session they gave out as we left."

I had one of those flyers in my file on mediums, and I was pretty sure I'd been at that seance. I'd gone to three, working on a piece on his use of funeral home records to obtain information on his victims' dead relatives. I'd never published the article—he'd been arrested on tax evasion charges before I finished it. I looked questioningly at Kildy.

"I was there researching a movie I was thinking about doing," Kildy said, "a comedy about a medium. It was called *Medium Rare*. Here's the screenplay." She handed me a thick bound manuscript. "I wouldn't read the whole thing. It's terrible. Anyway, I saw you there, talking to this guy with hair transplants—"

Magaputra's personal manager, who I'd suspected was feeding him info from the audience. I'd been trying to see if I could spot his concealed mike.

"I saw you talking to him, and I thought you looked—"

"Gullible?"

Her jaw tightened. "No. Interesting. Cute. Not the kind of guy I expected to see at one of the yogi's seances. I asked who you were, and somebody said you were a professional skeptic, and I thought, well, thank goodness! Magaputra was *patently* fake, and everyone was buying it, lock, stock, and barrel."

"Including your mother," I said.

"No, I made that up, too. My mother's even more of a skeptic than I am,

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especially after being married to my father. She's partly why I was interested—she's always after me to date guys from outside the movie business—so I bought a copy of *The Jaundiced Eye* and got your address and came to see you."

"And lied."

"Yes," she said. "It was a dumb thing to do. I knew it as soon as you started talking about how you shouldn't take anything anyone tells you on faith and how important independently verifiable evidence is, but I was afraid if I told you I was doing research for a movie you wouldn't want me tagging along, and if I told you I was attracted to you, you wouldn't believe me. You'd think it was a reality show or some kind of Hollywood fad thing everybody was doing right then, like opening a boutique or knitting or checking into Betty Ford."

"And you fully intended to tell me," I said, "you were just waiting for the right moment. In fact, you were all set to when Ariaura came along—"

"You don't have to be sarcastic," she said. "I thought if I went to work for you and you got to know me, you might stop thinking of me as a movie star and ask me out—"

"And incidentally pick up some good acting tips for your medium movie."

"Yes," she said angrily. "If you want to know the truth, I also thought if I kept going to those stupid past-life regression sessions and covens and soul retrieval circles, I might get over the stupid crush I had on you, but the better I got to know you, the worse it got." She looked up at me. "I know you don't believe me, but I didn't set you up. I'd never seen Ariaura before I went to that first seminar with my publicist, and I'm not in any kind of scam with her. And that story I told you the first day is the only thing I've ever lied to you about. Everything else I told you—about hating psychics and Ben Affleck and wanting to get out of the movie business and wanting to help you debunk charlatans and loathing the idea of ending up in rehab or in *The Hulk III*—was true." She rummaged in the pile and pulled out an olive green-covered script. "They really did offer me the part."

"Of the Hulk?"

"No," she said and held the script out to me. "Of the love interest."

She looked up at me with those blue eyes of hers, and if anything had ever been too good to be true, it was Kildy, standing there with that bilious green script and the office's fluorescent light on her golden hair. I had always wondered how all those chumps sitting around séance tables and squatting on lilac-colored cushions could believe such obvious nonsense. Well, now I knew.

Because standing there right then, knowing it all had to be a scam, that the Hulk script and the credit card bills and the phone bills didn't prove a thing, that they could easily have been faked and I was nothing more than a prize chump being set up for the big finale by a couple of pros, I still wanted to believe it. And not just the researching-a-movie alibi, but the whole thing—that H.L. Mencken had come back from the grave, that he was here to help me crusade against charlatans, that if I grabbed the wrist holding that script and pulled Kildy toward me and kissed her, we would live happily ever after.

And no wonder Mencken, railing against creationists and chiropractic

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and Mary Baker Eddy, hadn't gotten anywhere. What chance do facts and reason possibly have against what people desperately need to believe?

Only Mencken hadn't come back. A third-rate channeler was only pretending to be him, and Kildy's protests of love, much as I wanted to hear them, were the oldest trick in the book.

"Nice try," I said.

"But you don't believe me," she said bleakly, and Ariaura walked in.

"I got your message," she said to Kildy in Mencken's gravelly voice. "I came as soon as I could." She plunked down in a chair facing me. "Those goons of Ariaura's—"

"You can knock off the voices, Ariaura," I said. "The jig, as Mencken would say, is up."

Ariaura looked inquiringly at Kildy.

"Rob thinks Ariaura's a fake," Kildy said.

Ariaura switched her gaze to me. "You just figured that out? Of course she's a fake, she's a bamboozling mounteback, an oleaginous—"

"He thinks you're not real," Kildy said. "He thinks you're just a voice Ariaura does, like Isus, that your disrupting her seminars is a trick to convince him she's an authentic channeler, and he thinks I'm in on the plot with you, that I helped you set him up."

Here it comes, I thought. Shocked outrage. Affronted innocence. Kildy's a total stranger, I've never seen her before in my life!

"He thinks that you—?" Ariaura hooted and banged the arms of the chair with glee. "Doesn't the poor fish know you're in love with him?"

"He thinks that's part of the scam," Kildy said earnestly. "The only way he'll believe I am is if he believes there *is* no scam, if he believes you're really Mencken."

"Well, then," Ariaura said and grinned, "I guess we'll have to convince him." She slapped her knees and turned expectantly to me. "What do you want to know, sir? I was born in 1880 at nine PM, right before the police went out and raided ten or twenty saloons, and went to work at the *Morning Herald* at the tender age of eighteen—"

"Where you laid siege to the editor Max Ways for four straight weeks before he gave you an assignment," I said, "but my knowing that doesn't any more make me Henry Lawrence Mencken than it does you."

"Henry *Louis*," Ariaura said, "after an uncle of mine who died when he was a baby. All right, you set the questions."

"It's not that simple," Kildy said. She pulled a chair up in front of Ariaura and sat down, facing her. She took both hands in hers. "To prove you're Mencken you can't just answer questions. The skeptic's first rule is: 'Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.' You've got to do something extraordinary."

"And independently verifiable," I said.

"Extraordinary," Ariaura said, looking at Kildy. "I presume you're not talking about handling snakes. Or speaking in tongues."

"No," I said.

"The problem is, if you prove you're Mencken," Kildy said earnestly, "then you're also proving that Ariaura's really channeling astral spirits, which means she's not—"

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"—the papuliferous poser I know her to be."

"Exactly," Kildy said, "and her career will skyrocket."

"Along with that of every other channeler and psychic and medium out there," I said.

"Rob's put his entire life into trying to debunk these people," Kildy said. "If you prove Ariaura's really channeling—"

"The noble calling of skepticism will be dealt a heavy blow," Ariaura said thoughtfully, "hardly the outcome a man like Mencken would want. So the only way I can prove who I am is to keep silent and go back to where I came from."

Kildy nodded.

"But I came to try and stop her. If I return to the ether, Ariaura will go right back to spreading her pernicious astral-plane-Higher-Wisdom hokum and bilking her benighted audiences out of their cash."

Kildy nodded again. "She might even pretend she's channeling you."

"*Pretend*!" Ariaura said, outraged. "I won't allow it! I'll—" and then stopped. "But if I speak out, I'm proving the very thing I'm trying to debunk. And if I don't—"

"Rob will never trust me again," Kildy said.

"So," Ariaura said, "it's—"

A catch-22, I thought, and then, if she says that I've got her—the book wasn't written till 1961, five years after Mencken died. And "catch-22" was the kind of thing, unlike "Bible belt" or "booboisie," that even Kildy wouldn't have thought of, it had become such an ingrained part of the language. I listened, waiting for Ariaura to say it.

"—a conundrum," she said.

"A what?" Kildy said.

"A puzzle with no solution, a hand there's no way to win, a hellacious dilemma."

"You're saying it's impossible," Kildy said hopelessly.

Ariaura shook her head. "I've had tougher assignments than this. There's bound to be something—" She turned to me. "She said something about 'the skeptic's first rule.' Are there any others?"

"Yes," I said. "If it seems too good to be true, it is."

"And 'by their fruits shall ye know them,' " Kildy said. "It's from the Bible."

"The Bible . . ." Ariaura said, narrowing her eyes thoughtfully. "The Bible . . . how much time have we got? When's Ariaura's next show?"

"Tonight," Kildy said, "but she canceled the last one. What if she—"

"What time?" Ariaura cut in.

"Eight o'clock."

"Eight o'clock," she repeated, and made a motion toward her right midsection for all the world like she was reaching for a pocket watch. "You two be out there, front row center."

"What are you doing to do?" Kildy asked hopefully.

"I dunno," Ariaura said. "Sometimes you don't have to do a damned thing—they do it to themselves. Look at that High Muckitymuck of Hot Air, Bryan." She laughed. "Either of you know where I can get some rope?" She didn't wait for an answer. "—I'd better get on it. There's only a

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couple of hours to deadline—" She slapped her knees. "Front row center," she said to Kildy. "Eight o'clock."

"What if she won't let us in?" Kildy asked. "Ariaura said she was going to get a restraining order against—"

"She'll let you in. Eight o'clock."

Kildy nodded. "I'll be there, but I don't know if Rob—"

"Oh, I wouldn't miss this for the world," I said.

Ariaura ignored my tone. "Bring a notebook," she ordered. "And in the meantime, you'd better get busy on your charlatan debunking. The sons of bitches are gaining on us."

"One sits through long sessions . . . and then suddenly there comes a show so gaudy and hilarious, so melodramatic and obscene, so unimaginably exhilirating and preposterous that one lives a gorgeous year in an hour."

—H.L. Mencken

An hour later a messenger showed up with a manila envelope. In it was a square vellum envelope sealed with purple wax and embossed with Isus's hieroglyphs. Inside were a lilac card printed in silver with "The pleasure of your company is requested . . ." and two tickets to the seminar.

"Is the invitation signed?" she'd asked.

She'd refused to leave after Ariaura'd departed, still acting the part of Mencken. "I'm staying right here with you till the seminar," she'd said, perching herself on my desk. "It's the only way I can prove I'm not off somewhere with Ariaura cooking up some trick. And here's my phone," she'd handed me her cell, "so you won't think I'm sending her secret messages via text-message or something. Do you want to check me to see if I'm wired?"

"No."

"Do you need any help?" Kildy'd asked, picking up a pile of proofs. "Do you want me to go over these, or am I fired?"

"I'll let you know after the seminar."

She'd given me a Julia Roberts-radiant smile and retreated to the far end of the office with the proofs, and I'd called up Charles Fred's file and started through it, looking for leads and trying not to think about Ariaura's parting shot.

I was positive I'd never told Kildy that story, and it wasn't in Daniels's biography, or Hobson's. The only place I'd ever seen it was in an article in the *Atlantic Monthly*. I looked it up in Bartlett's, but it wasn't there. I Googled "Mencken—bitches." Nothing.

Which didn't prove anything. Ariaura—or Kildy—could have read it in the *Atlantic Monthly* just like I had. And since when had H.L. Mencken looked to the Bible for inspiration? That remark alone proved it wasn't Mencken, didn't it? On the other hand, he hadn't said "catch-22," although "conundrum" wasn't nearly as precise a word. And he hadn't said William Jennings Bryan, he'd said "that High Muckitymuck of Hot Air,

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Bryan," which I hadn't read anywhere, but which sounded like something he would have put in that scathing eulogy he'd written of Bryan.

And this wasn't going anywhere. There was nothing, short of a heretofore undiscovered manuscript or a will in his handwriting leaving everything to Lillian Gish—no, that wouldn't work. The aphasic stroke, remember?—that would prove it was Mencken. And both of those could be faked, too.

And there wasn't anything that could do what Kildy had told him—correction, told Ariaura she had to do: prove he was real without proving Ariaura was legit. Which she clearly wasn't.

I got out Ariaura's transcripts and read through them, looking for I wasn't sure what, until the tickets came.

"Is the card signed?" Kildy asked again.

"No," I said and handed it to her.

"'The pleasure of your company is requested . . .' is printed on," she said, turning the invitation over to look at the back. "What about the address on the envelope?"

"There isn't one," I said, seeing where she was going with this. "But just because it's not handwritten, that doesn't prove it's from Mencken."

"I know. 'Extraordinary claims,' but at least it's consistent with its being Mencken."

"It's also consistent with the two of you trying to convince me it's Mencken so I'll go to that seminar tonight."

"You think it's a trap?" Kildy said.

"Yes," I said, but standing there, staring at the tickets, I had no idea what kind. Ariaura couldn't possibly still be hoping I'd stand up and shout, "By George, she's the real thing! She's channeling Mencken!" no matter what anecdote she quoted. I wondered if her lawyers might be intending to slap me with a restraining order or a subpoena when I walked in, but that made no sense. She knew my address—she'd been here this very afternoon, and I'd been here most of the past two days. Besides, if she had me arrested, the press would be clamoring to talk to me, and she wouldn't want me voicing my suspicions of a con game to the L.A. *Times*.

When Kildy and I left for the seminar an hour and a half later (on our way out, I'd pretended I forgot my keys and left Kildy standing in the hall while I went back in, bound *The Baby in the Icebox* with Scotch tape, and hid it down behind the bookcase), I still hadn't come up with a plausible theory, and the Santa Monica Hilton, where the seminar was being held, didn't yield any clues.

It had the same "Believe and It Will Happen" banner, the same Tom Cruise-ish bodyguards, the same security check. They confiscated my Olympus and my digital recorder and Kildy's Hasaka (and asked for her autograph), and we went through the same crystal/pyramid/amulet-crammed waiting area into the same lilac-and-rose draped ballroom. With the same hard, bare floor.

"Oh, I forgot to bring pillows, I'm sorry," Kildy said and started toward the ushers and stacks of lilac-plastic cushions at the rear. Halfway there she turned around and came back. "I don't want to have had an opportunity to send some kind of secret message to Ariaura," she said. "If you want to come with me . . ."

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I shook my head. "The floor'll be good," I said, lowering myself to the ground. "It may actually keep me in touch with reality."

Kildy sat down effortlessly beside me, opened her bag, and fumbled in it for her mirror. I looked around. The crowd seemed a little sparser, and somewhere behind us, I heard a woman say, "It was *so* bizarre. Romtha never did anything like that. I wonder if she's drinking."

The lights went pink, the music swelled, and Brad Pitt came out, went through the same spiel (no flash, no applause, no bathroom breaks) and the same intro (Atlantis, Oracle of Delphi, Cosmic All), and revealed Ariaura, standing at the top of the same black stairway.

She was exactly the same as she had been at that first seminar, dramatically regal in her purple robes and amulets, serene as she acknowledged the audience's applause. The events of the past few days—her roaring into my office, asking frightenedly, "What's happening? Where am I?," slapping her knees and exploding with laughter—might never have happened.

And obviously had been a fake, I thought grimly. I glanced at Kildy. She was still fishing unconcernedly in her bag.

"Welcome, Seekers after Divine Truth," Ariaura said. "We're going to have a wonderful spiritual experience together here today. It's a very special day. This is my one hundredth 'Believe and It Will Happen' seminar.'"

Lots of applause, which after a couple of minutes she motioned to stop.

"In honor of the anniversary, Isus and I want to do something a little different today."

More applause. I glanced at the ushers. They were looking nervously at each other, as if they expected her to start spouting Menckenese, but the voice was clearly Ariaura's and so was the Oprah-perky manner.

"My—*our*—seminars are usually pretty structured. They have to be—if the auratic vibrations aren't exactly right beforehand, the spirits cannot come, and after I've channeled, I'm physically and spiritually exhausted, so I rarely have the opportunity to just *talk* to you. But today's a special occasion. So I'd like the tech crew—" she looked up at the control booth, "—to bring up the lights—"

There was a pause, as if the tech crew was debating whether to follow orders, and then the lights came up.

"Thanks, that's perfect, you can have the rest of the day off," Ariaura said. She turned to the emcee. "That goes for you, too, Ken. And my fabulous ushers—Derek, Jared, Tad—let's hear it for the great job they do."

She led a round of applause and then, since the ushers continued to stand there at the doors, looking warily at each other and at the emcee, she made shooing motions with her hands. "Go on. Scoot. I want to talk to these people in private," and when they still hesitated, "You'll still get paid for the full seminar. Go on." She walked over to the emcee and said something to him, smiling, and it must have reassured him because he nodded to the ushers and then up at the control room, and the ushers went out.

I looked over at Kildy. She was calmly applying lipstick. I looked back at the stage.

"Are you sure—?" I could see the emcee whisper to Ariaura.

"I'm *fine*," she mouthed back at him.

The emcee frowned and then stepped off the stage and over to the side

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door, and the cameraman at the back began taking his videocam off its tripod. "No, no, Ernesto, not you," Ariaura said, "Keep filming."

She waited as the emcee pulled the last door shut behind him and then walked to the front of the stage and stood there completely silent, her arms stiffly at her sides.

Kildy leaned close to me, her lipstick still in her hand. "Are you thinking the prom scene in *Carrie*?"

I nodded, gauging our distance to the emergency exit. There was a distant sound of a door shutting above us—the control room—and Ariaura clasped her hands together. "Alone at last," she said, smiling. "I thought they'd *never* leave."

Laughter.

"And now that they're gone, I have to say this—" She paused dramatically. "Aren't they *gorgeous*?"

Laughter, applause, and several whistles. Ariaura waited till the noise had died down and then asked, "How many of you were at my seminar last Saturday?"

The mood changed instantly. Several hands went up, but tentatively, and two hoop-earringed women looked at each other with the same nervous glance as the ushers had had.

"Or at the one two weeks ago?" Ariaura asked.

Another couple of hands.

"Well, for those of you who weren't at either, let's just say that lately my seminars have been rather . . . interesting, to put it mildly."

Scattered nervous laughter.

"And those of you familiar with the spirit world know that's what can happen when we try to make contact with energies beyond our earthly plane. The astral plane can be a dangerous place. There are spirits there beyond our control, false spirits who seek to keep us from enlightenment."

False spirits is right, I thought.

"But I fear them not, for my weapon is the Truth." She somehow managed to say it with a capital T.

I looked over at Kildy. She was leaning forward the way she had at that first seminar, intent on Ariaura's words. She was still holding her mirror and lipstick. "What's she up to?" I whispered to Kildy.

She shook her head, still intent on the stage. "It's not her."

"What?"

"She's channeling."

"Chan—?" I said and looked at the stage.

"No spirit, no matter how dark," Ariaura said, "no matter how dishonest, can stand between me and that Higher Truth."

Applause, more enthusiastic.

"Or keep me from bringing that Truth to all of you." She smiled and spread out her arms. "I'm a fraud, a charlatan, a fake," she said cheerfully. "I've never channeled a cosmic spirit in my life. Isus is something I made up back in 1996, when I was running a pyramid scheme in Dayton, Ohio. The feds were closing in on us, and I'd already been up on charges of mail fraud in '94, so I changed my name—my real name's Bonnie Friehl, by the way, but I was using Doreen Manning in Dayton—and stashed the

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money in a bank in Chickamauga, Virginia, my home town, and then moved to Miami Beach and did fortune-telling while I worked on perfecting Isus's voice."

I fumbled for my notebook and pen. Bonnie Friehl, Chickamauga, Miami Beach—

"I did fortune-telling, curses mostly—'Pay me and I'll remove the curse I see hanging over you'—till I had my Isus-impersonation ready and then I contacted this guy I knew in Vegas—"

There was an enormous crash from the rear. Ernesto had dropped his shoulder-held video camera and was heading for the door. And this needed to be on film. But I didn't want to miss anything while I tried to figure out how the camera worked.

I glanced over at Kildy, hoping she was taking notes, but she seemed transfixed by what was happening onstage, her forgotten mirror and lipstick still in her hands, her mouth open. I would have to risk missing a few words. I scrambled to my feet.

"Where are you going?" Kildy whispered.

"I've got to get this on tape."

"We are," she said calmly, and nodded imperceptibly at the lipstick and then the mirror, "Audio . . . and video."

"I love you," I said.

She nodded. "You'd better get those names down, just in case the police confiscate my makeup as evidence," she said.

"His name was Chuck Venture," Ariaura was saying. "He and I had worked together on a chain-letter scheme. His real name's Harold Vogel, but you probably know him by the name he uses out here, Charles Fred."

Jesus. I scribbled the names down: Harold Vogel, Chuck Venture—

"We'd worked a couple of chain-letter scams together," Ariaura said, "so I told him I wanted him to take me to Salem and set me up in the channeling business."

There was a clank and a thud as Ernesto made it to the door and out. It slammed shut behind him.

"Harold always did have a bad habit of writing everything down," Ariaura said chattily. "'You can't blackmail me, Doreen,' he said. 'Wanna bet?' I said. 'It's all in a safety deposit box in Dayton with instructions to open it if anything happens to me.'" She leaned confidingly forward. "It's not, of course. It's in the safe in my bedroom behind the portrait of Isus. The combination's twelve left, six right, fourteen left." She laughed brightly. "So anyway, he taught me all about how you soften the chumps up in the seminars so they'll tell Isus all about their love life in the private audiences and then send them copies of the audience videotapes—"

There were several audible gasps behind me and then the beginnings of a murmur, or possibly a growl, but Ariaura paid no attention—

"—and he introduced me to one of the orderlies at New Beginnings Rehab center, and the deep masseuse at the Willowsage Spa for personal details Isus can use to convince them he knows all-sees all—"

The growl was becoming a roar, but it was scarcely audible over the shouts from outside and the banging on the doors, which were apparently locked from the inside.

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"—and how to change my voice and expression to make it look like I'm actually channeling a spirit from beyond—"

It sounded as though the emcee and ushers had found a battering ram. The banging had become shuddering thuds.

"—although I don't think learning all that junk about Lemuria and stuff was necessary," Ariaura said. "I mean, it's obvious you people will believe *anything*." She smiled beatifically at the audience, as if expecting applause, but the only sound (beside the thuds) was of cell phone keys being hit and women shouting into them. When I glanced back, everybody except Kildy had a phone clapped to their ear.

"Are there any questions?" Ariaura asked brightly.

"Yes," I said. "Are you saying you're the one doing the voice of Isus?"

She smiled pleasedly down at me. "Of course. There's no such thing as channeling spirits from the Great Beyond. Other questions?" She looked past me to the other wildly waving hands. "Yes? The woman in blue?"

"How could you lie to us, you—"

I stepped adroitly in front of her. "Are you saying Todd Phoenix is a fake, too?"

"Oh, yes," Ariaura said. "They're all fakes—Todd Phoenix, Joye Wildde, Randall Mars. Next question? Yes, Miss Ross?"

Kildy stepped forward, still holding the compact and lipstick. "When was the first time you met me?" she asked.

"You don't have to do this," I said.

"Just for the record," she said, flashing me her radiant smile and then turning back to the stage. "Ariaura, had you ever met me before last week?"

"No," she said. "I saw you at Ari—at my seminar, but I didn't meet you till afterward at the office of *The Jaundiced Eye*, a fine magazine, by the way. I suggest you all take out subscriptions."

"And I'm not your shill?" Kildy persisted.

"No, though I do have them," she said. "The woman in green back there in the sixth row is one," she said, pointing at a plump brunette. "Stand up, Lucy."

Lucy was already scuttling to the door, and so were a thin redhead in a rainbow caftan and an impeccably tailored sixty-year-old in an Armani suit, with a large number of the audience right on their tails.

"Janine's one, too," Ariaura said, pointing at the redhead. "And Doris. They all help gather personal information for Isus to tell them, so it looks like he 'knows all, sees all.'" She laughed delightedly. "Come up on stage and take a bow, girls."

The 'girls' ignored her. Doris, a pack of elderly women on her heels, pushed open the middle door and shouted, "You've got to stop her!"

The emcee and ushers began pushing their way through the door and toward the stage. The audience was even more determined to get out than they were to get in, but I still didn't have much time. "Are all the psychics you named using blackmail like you?" I asked.

"Ariaura!" the emcee shouted, halfway to the stage and caught in the flood of women. "Stop talking. Anything you say can be held against you."

"Oh, hi, Ken," she said. "Ken's in charge of laundering all our money. Take a bow, Ken! And you, too, Derek and Tad and Jared," she said, indi-

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cating the ushers. "The boys pump the audience for information and feed it to me over this," she said, holding up her sacred amulet.

She looked back at me. "I forgot what you asked."

"Are all the pyschics you named using blackmail like you?"

"No, not all of them. Swami Vishnu Jammi uses post-hypnotic suggestion, and Nadrilene's always used extortion."

"What about Charles Fred? What's his scam?"

"Invest—" Ariaura's pin-on mike went suddenly dead. I looked back at the melee. One of the ushers was proudly holding up an unplugged cord.

"Investment fraud," Ariaura shouted, her hands cupped around her mouth. "Chuck tells his marks their dead relations want them to invest in certain stocks. I'd suggest you—"

One of the ushers reached the stage. He grabbed Ariaura by one arm and tried to grab the other.

"—suggest you check out Metra—" Ariaura shouted, flailing at him. "Metracon, Spirilink—"

A second usher appeared, and the two of them managed to pinion her arms. "Crystalcom, Inc—" she said, kicking out at them, "—and Universis. Find out—" She aimed a kick at the groin of one of the ushers that made me flinch. "Get your paws off me."

The emcee stepped in front of her. "That concludes Ariaura's presentation," he said, avoiding her kicking feet. "Thank you all for coming. Videos of—" he said and then thought better of it, "—personally autographed copies of Ariaura's book, *Believe and—*"

"Find out who the majority stockholder is," Ariaura shrieked, struggling. "And ask Chuck what he knows about a check forgery scam Zolita's running in Reno."

"—*It Will Happen* are on sale in the . . ." the emcee said and gave up. He grabbed for Ariaura's feet. The three of them wrestled her toward the wings.

"One last question!" I shouted, but it was too late. They already had her off the stage. "Why was the baby in the icebox?"

". . . this is the last time you'll see me. . . ."
—H.L. Mencken

"It still doesn't prove it was Mencken," I told Kildy. "The whole thing could been a manifestation of Ariaura's—excuse me, Bonnie Friehl's—subconscious, produced by her guilt."

"*Or*," Kildy said, "there could have been a scam just like the one you postulated, only one of the swindlers fell in love with you and decided she couldn't go through with it."

"Nope, that won't work," I said. "She might have been able to talk Ariaura into calling off the scam, but not into confessing all those crimes."

"If she really committed them," Kildy said. "We don't have any independently verifiable evidence that she is Bonnie Friehl yet." But the fingerprints on her Ohio driver's license matched, and every single lead she'd given us checked out.

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We spent the next two months following up on all of them and putting together a massive special issue on "The Great Channeling Swindle." It looked like we were going to have to testify at Ariaura's preliminary hearing, which could have proved awkward, but she and her lawyers got in a big fight over whether or not to use an insanity defense since she was claiming she'd been possessed by the Spirit of Evil and Darkness, and she ended up firing them and turning state's evidence against Charles Fred, Joye Wildde, and several other psychics she hadn't gotten around to mentioning, and it began to look like the magazine might fold because there weren't any scams left to write about.

Fat chance. Within weeks, new mediums and psychics, advertising themselves as "Restorers of Cosmic Ethics" and "the spirit entity you can trust," moved in to fill the void, and a new weight-loss-through-meditation program began packing them in, promising Low-Carb Essence, and Kildy and I were back in business.

"He didn't make any difference at all," Kildy said disgustedly after a standing-room-only seminar on psychic Botox treatments.

"Yeah, he did," I said. "Charles Fred's up on insider trading charges, attendance is down at the Temple of Cosmic Exploration, and half of L.A.'s psychics are on the lam. And it'll take everybody awhile to come up with new methods for separating people from their money."

"I thought you said it wasn't Mencken."

"I said it didn't *prove* it was Mencken. Rule Number One: Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence."

"And you don't think what happened on that stage was extraordinary?"

I had to admit it was. "But it could have been Ariaura herself. She didn't say anything she couldn't have known."

"What about her telling us the combination of her safe? And ordering everybody to subscribe to *The Jaundiced Eye*?"

"It still doesn't prove it was Mencken. It could have been some sort of Bridey Murphy phenomenon. Ariaura could have had a babysitter who read the Baltimore *Sun* out loud to her when she was a toddler."

Kildy laughed. "You don't believe that."

"I don't believe anything without proof," I said. "I'm a skeptic, remember? And there's nothing that happened on that stage that couldn't be explained rationally."

"Exactly," Kildy said.

"What do you mean, exactly?"

"By their fruits shall ye know them."

"What?"

"I mean it has to have been Mencken because he did exactly what we asked him to do: prove it wasn't a scam and he wasn't a fake and Ariaura was. And do it without proving he was Mencken because if he did, then that proved she was on the level. Which *proves* it was Mencken."

There was no good answer to that kind of crazy illogic except to change the subject, which I did. I kissed her.

And then sent the transcripts of Ariaura's outbursts to UCLA to have the language patterns compared to Mencken's writing. Independently verifiable evidence. And got the taped *Baby in the Icebox* out of its hiding

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place down behind the bookcase while Kildy was out of the office, took it home, wrapped it in tin foil, stuck it inside an empty *Lean Cuisine* box, and hid it—where else?—in the icebox. Old habits die hard.

UCLA sent the transcripts back, saying it wasn't a big enough sample for a conclusive result. So did CalTech. And Duke. So that was that. Which was too bad. It would have been nice to have Mencken back in the fray, even for a little while. He had definitely left too soon.

So Kildy and I would have to pick up where he left off, which meant not only putting "The sons of bitches are gaining on us," on the masthead of the *The Jaundiced Eye*, but trying to channel his spirit into every page.

And that didn't just mean exposing shysters and con men. Mencken hadn't been the important force he was because of his rants against creationism and faith-healers and patent medicine, but because of what he'd stood for: the Truth. That's why he'd hated ignorance and superstition and dishonesty so much, because he loved science and reason and logic, and he'd communicated that love, that passion, to his readers with every word he wrote.

That was what we had to do with *The Jaundiced Eye*. It wasn't enough just to expose Ariaura and Swami Vishnu and psychic dentists and meditation Atkins diets. We also had to make our readers as passionate about science and reason as they were about Romtha and luminescence readings. We had to not only tell the truth, but make our readers *want* to believe it.

So, as I say, we were pretty busy for the next few months, revamping the magazine, cooperating with the police, and following up on all the leads Ariaura had given us. We went to Vegas to research the chain-letter scam she and Chuck Venture/Charles Fred had run, after which I came home to put the magazine to bed, and Kildy went to Dayton and then to Chickamauga to follow up on Ariaura's criminal history.

She called last night. "It's me, Rob," she said, sounding excited. "I'm in Chattanooga."

"Chattanooga, *Tennessee?*" I said. "What are you doing there?"

"The prosecutor working on the pyramid scheme case is on a trip to Roanoke, so I can't see him till Monday, and the school board in Zion—that's a little town near here—is trying to pass a law requiring intelligent design to be taught in the public schools. This Zion thing's part of a nationwide program that's going to introduce intelligent design state by state. So, anyway, since I couldn't see the prosecutor, I thought I'd drive over—it's only about fifty miles from Chickamauga—and interview some of the science teachers for that piece on 'The Scopes Trial Eighty Years Out' you were talking about doing."

"And?" I said warily.

"*And*, according to the chemistry teacher, something peculiar happened at the school board meeting. It might be nothing, but I thought I'd better call so you could be looking up flights to Chattanooga, just in case."

Just in case.

"One of the school board members, a Mr.—" she paused as if consulting her notes, "Horace Didlong, was talking about the lack of scientific proof for Darwin's theory, when he suddenly started ranting at the crowd."

"Did the chemistry teacher say what he said?" I asked, hoping I didn't already know.

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"She couldn't remember all of it," Kildy said, "but the basketball coach said some of the students had said they intended to tape the meeting and send it to the ACLU, and he'd try to find out if they did and get me a copy. He said it was 'a very odd outburst, almost like he was possessed.'"

"Or drunk," I said. "And neither of them remembers what he said?"

"No, they both do, just not everything. Didlong apparently went on for several minutes. He said he couldn't believe there were still addlepated ignoramuses around who didn't believe in evolution, and what the hell had they been teaching in the schools all this time. The chemistry teacher said the rant went on like that for about five minutes and then broke off, right in the middle of a word, and Didlong went back to talking about how Newton's Second Law makes evolution physically impossible."

"Have you interviewed Didlong?"

"No. I'm going over there as soon as we finish talking, but the chemistry teacher said she heard Didlong's wife ask him what happened, and he looked like he didn't have any idea."

"That doesn't prove it's Mencken," I said.

"I know," she said, but it *is* Tennessee, and it *is* evolution. And it would be nice if it was him, wouldn't it?"

Nice. H.L. Mencken loose in the middle of Tennessee in the middle of a creationism debate.

"Yeah," I said and grinned, "it would, but it's much more likely Horace Didlong has been smoking something he grew in his backyard. Or is trying to stir up some publicity, à la Judge Roy Moore and his Ten Commandments monument. Do they remember anything else he said?"

"Yes, um . . . where is it?" she said. "Oh, here it is. He called the other board members a gang of benighted rubes . . . and then he said he'd take a monkey any day over a school board whose cerebellums were all paralyzed from listening to too much theological bombast . . . and right at the end, before he broke off, the chemistry teacher said he said, 'I never saw much resemblance to Alice myself.'"

"Alice?" I said. "They're sure he said Alice and not August?"

"Yes, because the chemistry teacher's name is Alice, and she thought he was talking to her, and the chairman of the school board did, too, because he looked at her and said, 'Alice? What the heck does Alice have to do with intelligent design?' and Didlong said, 'Jamie sure could write, though, even if the bastard did steal my girl. You better be careful I don't steal yours.' Do you know what that means, Rob?"

"Yes," I said. "How long does it take to get a marriage license in Tennessee?"

"I'll find out," Kildy said, sounding pleased, "and then the chairman said, 'You cannot use language like that,' and, according to the chemistry teacher, Didlong said . . . wait a minute, I need to read it to you so I get it right—it really didn't make any sense—he said, 'You'd be surprised at what I can do. Like stir up the animals. Speaking of which, that's why the baby was stashed in the icebox. Its mother stuck it there to keep the tiger from eating it.'"

"I'll be right there," I said. ○

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

And Now the Muse

And Now the News . . . (North Atlantic Books, hardcover, $35.00, 377 pages, ISBN 1-55643-460-X) is the ninth volume in the ongoing series collecting in order of composition and publication all the short fiction of Theodore Sturgeon. This series was originally projected to require ten volumes, but the latest entry extends only to 1957 in Sturgeon's career. Plainly, several more books will be needed to hold the rest of Sturgeon's lifetime output. Although his production tailed off in the later years of his life, he was not utterly barren, and many good stories await reprinting. I, for one, eagerly look forward to re-reading "Pruzy's Pot," a knockout tale about a sentient toilet—trust me on this—originating in the pages of the *National Lampoon* in the 1970s. So if we don't want the publisher or the editor—the wise, patient and insightful Paul Williams—to become fatigued or disheartened before this grand project comes to its worthy conclusion, we should all rush out and buy Volume IX.

It's not as if you'll be wasting your hard-earned money, after all. The current book holds such a plethora of wonders and astonishing writing that it would, alone on its own merits, have fully established the career of any other lesser writer. You'll encounter, naturally, the title story, which deals with a media-saturated individual and his retreat into a kind of happiness that society deems madness. But you'll also discover fourteen other gems (along with copious notes by Williams and a heartfelt introduction by David Hartwell). There's "Won't You Walk. . . ?" —about a man who repairs broken personalities for a hobby. There's "The Skills of Xanadu," which takes the tactics and themes of a typical Eric Frank Russell story and invests them with deeper psychology and emotions. "The Girl Had Guts" posits an alien virus with disturbing effects on the human anatomy, pitched with a gusto and rigor that could've defined a whole new school of bio-SF. "The Other Celia" oscillates between pure SF and pure horror, but is one-hundred-percent character-driven. And "The Pod in the Barrier" sets up an elaborate cosmic scenario that all comes to hinge on the abilities of a plain-faced, reviled woman. And none of my teasers even acknowledge the non-SF pieces, such as a western, mysteries, and a radio-drama.

Much has been made of Sturgeon's propensity to dissect love and hate and alienation, but this volume revealed to me another of his grand themes, and that's the quest for utopia. In so many stories Sturgeon seeks to analyze what makes our species its own worst enemy, and how we might overcome our innate liabilities of character and intelligence. If that's not one of the grandest themes of science fiction, then I don't know what is.

And the sheer writing here!

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Ponder the perfect way Sturgeon evokes an average quality of speech: "to find her voice, divide the sound of a crowd by the number of people in it." A myriad instances of perfectly apt and poetic metaphors like this one await the lucky reader.

Aside from the eternal matters of the human heart he focused on, so many issues Sturgeon picked out as important remain central and relevant some fifty years later. The credulity of New Agers looking for a scapegoat for mankind's lot ("Fear is a Business"). The way the space program is run by all the wrong types for all the wrong reasons ("The Claustrophile"). And of course the interconnectedness of all humanity and the psychic burdens such interdependence imposes, as in the title piece.

It's hard to believe that during this period of his life Sturgeon underwent a horrific writer's block for a time, a block relieved only through the good offices of Robert Heinlein and the help of a new collaborator, Don Ward. That he could produce such works of wonder even under such oppressive personal conditions is testament to his genius. This book as a whole constitutes the biggest "what if" question of all. What if Sturgeon had been freed of all mundane constraints? Would he have created superior stories in greater numbers? Or was the domestic and fiscal mire he labored in necessary for the lotuses to bloom?

Contact North Atlantic Books at POB 12327, Berkeley, CA 94712.

A Teatime Fantasy

It took Caroline Stevermer ten years to produce a sequel to her excellent *A College of Magics* (1994), but the wait was well worth it. *A Scholar of Magics* (Tor, hardcover, $19.95, 299 pages, ISBN 0-765-30308-6) replicates all the charms of its predecessor as well as expanding on that unique vision. (And Stevermer was hardly idle during that interval, releasing a standalone book—*When the King Comes Home* [2001]—between the pair.)

College conveyed the story of Faris Nallaneen, heiress to a Ruritanian principality in Europe, who embarks on a career in magic at the mysterious Greenlaw College in France. (A certain Mister Potter, of course, was as yet uncreated when *College* debuted. Stevermer's choice to focus on college-level magicians rather than prep-schoolers perfectly encapsulates the contrasting maturity levels of both series.) The world that hosts Greenlaw is an alternate Edwardian timeline very similar to our history, save for the role that magic has played. One of the most intriguing of Faris's peers was Jane Brailsford, a strong-willed young woman of eccentric character. Now Jane returns to co-star in the new book, while Faris remains offstage.

Jane's partner in magic this time is one Samuel Lambert, an American. Formerly a sharpshooter with a Wild West Show, Lambert has been hired by England's Glasscastle College—Glasscastle and Greenlaw are friendly rivals in magic—to assist with some government-funded magical research known mysteriously as the Agincourt Project. Lambert is enjoying his days of semi-idleness at Glasscastle, located a short train ride from London, soaking up the uncanny atmosphere of the place. "Every day was divided by bells, simple music to

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mark the hours. Every night was bordered by bells, from the curfew that rang stray undergraduates home at midnight to vigorous changes that welcomed every day at Prime, a joyous cascade of sound that began in the last moments of darkness and spilled over into the first gray shades of morning."

Jane has arrived from France bearing a secret message from Faris, now one of the Four Wardens of the world. Lambert's scholarly roommate, Nicholas Fell, has been nominated as Warden of the West, but it's a role Fell is reluctant to undertake for various reasons. Fell's trepidations about his new job are soon validated by mysterious breakins, attempted abductions, and other interference from enemies unknown. When Fell finally disappears for good, Jane and Sam have no recourse but to set out on a rescue mission. But they will soon encounter such hazards as enchanted chairs and labyrinthine forests standing between them and the necessary repairs of the cosmos.

Stevermer's template in this series is the mannered, arch, wry, urbane fiction of such authors as P.G. Wodehouse, E.F. Benson, and even Jane Austen. With such glorious mentors, Stevermer is aiming for the stars, but she succeeds. Her dialogue is crisp and funny, her characters charmingly conjured, her period details vivid, and her pacing slowed down enough from the contemporary narrative norm to convey the ambiance of her chosen era. For instance, only in such a book would Sam and Nicholas pause long enough in their flight from an enemy to make sure they had packed enough clean shirt collars to mingle in society. Yet the cumulative effect of the tale is hardly trivial. It is resonant with large issues such as love, duty, and art.

This book will be enjoyed by all those who appreciate the consanguineous novels of Van Reid, James Blaylock, and Tim Powers. It was such a pleasure that I hope I won't have to wait ten years for a sequel. But if that's what Stevermer needs to compose such a fine book, then by Jove, she shall have it!

Terrors, Domestic and Otherwise

Authors from within our genre continue to flock to the Young Adult market, bringing with them all the expertise and excitement they have manifested in their "adult" material. One of the latest to venture into this realm is the UK writer Keith Brooke, who has chosen the penname "Nick Gifford" to launch his alternate career. His second YA book is *Flesh & Blood* (Penguin Puffin, trade paper, £4.99, 211 pages, ISBN 0-141-31605-5), and it's a corker.

Matt Guilder is a fifteen-year-old attending the funeral of his grandmother when we first meet him. Troubled by odd sensations of alien mental intrusions during the ceremony, Matt tries to suppress the sense that there is something uncanny about his extended family. But meeting his cousins—Vince, Tina, and Kirsty—hardly allays that suspicion. Vince is a reclusive tough guy, Tina a resentful adolescent, and Kirsty a weirdly precocious seven-year-old. Matt manages to survive the funeral, but some time later he is forced to confront his heritage more closely. Splitting up with Matt's father, Matt's mother takes him to live

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with his cousins and the ailing Gramps. There, Matt will discover that his family—the Waredens—are ancient guardians of a portal to a malevolent land called Alternity. And Vince has selfish plans to use Matt to breach the wall between universes, unleashing hell on earth.

Brooke/Gifford does several things very well here. He crafts a realistic domestic portrait of the tensions that arise when two branches of a family are forced into proximity. Tina's protectiveness toward Kirsty and her animosity toward Matt come across as eminently believable. As well, Matt's own confusion about his future and his status within the extended family are heartfelt. Equally important, the fantastical aspects of the tale are deeply imagined and limned. The realm of Alternity, which entraps Matt for some time, is a nightmare zone of twisted physics, not just some nebulous McGuffin. Matt's struggles in that zone reflect his character and courage just as much as his efforts in our familiar world do.

The pacing and plotting in this novel are superb. Twists and surprises occur at unpredictable intervals. And the ending is a blend of hope and menace. Brooke achieves a level of excellence equivalent to one of Ramsey Campbell's books, neither condescending to his youthful readers nor slighting his adult ones. Now, *that's* a truly scary accomplishment!

I've been presenting the YA novels of Kathe Koja in tandem with those of Leander Watts. But Koja's third book has leapfrogged Watts's, so we'll have to break the tradition.

The Blue Mirror (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, hardcover, $16.00, 119 pages, ISBN 0-374-30849-7) is something of a departure from Koja's two previous YA books. First, our protagonist, Maggy Klass, is older, seventeen, and almost an adult. This opens up themes and topics not previously explored in *straydog* (2002) and *Buddha Boy* (2003), including Maggy's sexual feelings. Second, this is the only one of Koja's trilogy to venture into the outright supernatural (sophisticatedly subliminal as it is). What carries over from the earlier novels is Koja's unique style, a kind of junior stream-of-consciousness, and her total immersion in the sensibilities of her heroine.

A talented artist, Maggy escapes her horrid homelife (her divorced mother, Monica, is a hapless alcoholic) by hanging out at a coffee shop called The Blue Mirror. Synchronistically, this name is what Maggy also calls the fantasy world of her sketchbook: "Hieronymous Bosch in a high-speed blender meets Alice-through-the-looking-glass." (Koja has a vivid way of describing Maggy's sketches, making them blaze off the printed page.) Both café and sketchbook provide the emotional and physical relief that allows Maggy to continue with school, where she is generally ignored. But both sanctums are about to be upset by the arrival of a street kid named Cole. Accompanied by two female acolytes, Marianne and Jouly, Cole is a demonically alluring figure. Fey, wearing blue lipstick, Cole fastens on Maggy as his latest conquest. Soon, she is bunking school, losing her old friends, and falling into a dangerous streetlife, all for Cole's professed love. Will Maggy awake from her enthrallment, or succumb? Perhaps only her art can save her.

Koja plays masterfully with some

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potent archetypes here. On one level, this tale is a perversion of J.M. Barrie's classic, with Cole an evil Peter Pan and Maggy a tainted Wendy. On another level, with the genders reversed, this is the fairy-tale of the Snow Queen. (Cole magically heals a cut on Maggy's finger, but doing so leaves that digit permanently numb.) Finally, Cole functions as the Erl-Konig, the child-stealing Faerie reiver. The amazing thing is that, like the best symbology and allegory, all of this is subsumed within the satisfying and logical mundane plot.

The Blue Mirror is Koja's best YA book to date, a fusion of the mythic and the quotidian. She has additional titles in the publishing pipeline, and canny readers will stay alert for them.

Pratfalls and Pitfalls on a Generation Ship

The big secret of Brian Aldiss's first novel—that it was set on an interstellar generation ship—was famously destroyed by the US publisher, who changed the UK title *Non-Stop* (1958) to *Starship*. But I don't think that any such premature revelation will destroy your enjoyment of John Brosnan's *Mothership* (Gollancz, trade paper, £10.99, 280 pages, ISBN 0-575-07492-2). The book's back-cover copy alerts readers to the setup, and the protagonists discover the truth about their world early on in the plot, so conceptual breakthrough is hardly the point here. In fact, Brosnan undercuts that sacred cow of SF tropes, as he both simultaneously undercuts and revels in so much other genre claptrap. When one of our heroes gets outside Mothership Urba and sees the universe for the first time while disoriented by zero-gee, this is the deadpan dialogue that ensues:

> "Gentlemen," said Alucia, "I give you . . . the universe!"
>
> "I think I'm going to throw up," said Ken.
>
> "The Universe often has that effect on people," she said.

If you can envision one of Adam Roberts's serious and severe wartime scenarios filtered through Terry Pratchett's off-the-wall humor, you'll have a fair conception of what Brosnan is up to here.

The starship Urba is a nine-thousand-mile-long cylinder divided into many small kingdoms within. These kingdoms and the bulk of their populations are maintained in a faux feudalism enforced by a class known as the Elite, who possess all the real technology onboard, and know the truth about the world. (Everyone else thinks their home is a bubble in a universe of solid rock.) But due to a mysterious power failure, the Elite have fallen overnight from their eminence, slaughtered by the rebellious mundanes. Chaos ensues across the ship, due to their absent dominant hand. In the kingdom of Capelia, Prince Kender, a headstrong naive champion, is dispatched by his father on a reconnaissance mission. Accompanying Prince Ken is his best friend, inept court-jester Jad. Like Don Q. and Sancho Panza, the pair form a duo whose interpersonal dynamics are perfect for much humor. When Alucia, a former Elite, enters the mix, the comedic and dramatic possibilities are complete.

As the trio travel up and down

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the cylindrical ship, from the mysterious Elite Citadel to outer vacuum, from the pits of the Holy Diggers to the war camps of the vicious Lord Camarra, they gradually discover the reason behind the Elite's downfall and the threat that all of Urba faces. And it appears that the fate of their world lies solely in the trio's hands.

Brosnan, whose career began over twenty years ago, but who has, to the best of my knowledge, never attained US publication of his work, displays a sure hand with his action and characters. There's nothing radically new here, yet the mix is alluring. Blending swordplay with aliens produces a jolly romp akin to Poul Anderson's *The High Crusade* (1960). Brosnan's humor is broad and often silly—the god of war worshipped in Capelia is named Maurice—but at times rises to Monty-Pythonish heights. Like Keith Laumer, he's able to fashion a tale that moves from one slambang climax to another. And although the book is open-ended, he provides emotional and narrative closure to this installment of what will surely be a popular series. After all, how could any volume in which it is predicated that *The Lord of the Rings* would serve as a totalitarian template for social engineering fail to succeed?

Macabre Delights

Another fine British writer lacking a US presence commensurate with his large talents is Christopher Fowler. Author of ten novels and a number of short-story collections, Fowler can be experienced in one of his lamentably rare American outings in the new collection *Demonized* (Serpent's Tail, trade paper, $15.00, 241 pages, ISBN 1-85242-848-1). A front-cover blurb compares Fowler to early Ian McEwan, and there's a lot of truth to that. Featuring bizarre, creepy, gritty situations—even when outright supernatural elements are missing—and deep psychosexual probing, Fowler's work recalls the McEwan of *The Cement Garden* (1978) or *First Love, Last Rites* (1975). But he also shows affinities with two other UK writers, Will Self—for his ability to satirically dissect modern trends—and M. John Harrison—for his ability to see the eternal beneath the surface of the quotidian.

A Fowler story is always beautifully crafted, from swift, involving opening to quick-cut ending. Oftentimes, Fowler immediately plunges the reader into disorienting but hypnotic events in progress. Consider "Seven Feet," in which the protagonist is first seen while armoring his flat against rats—but why? Sometimes he'll be more straightforward, as in the *Sex-in-the-City*-meets-*Fatal-Attraction* mode of "Emotional Response." "The night Nell met the man with whom she fell in love, she was looking her best-ever all-time peak, which meant that she would either have to face the strain of looking that good whenever he was around, or only ever see him after he'd been drinking."

Fowler sketches in characters with just the right amount of sharp details—consider the portrait of Molly in "American Waitress." And his shocks are generally unpredictable. (Although SF-savvy readers will see the ending of the Sheckleyan "Cairo 6.1" coming a

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mile away.) Every once in a while, he highlights the import of his endings a tad too brightly, as in the closing line of "Hop": "The fresh white petals had transformed the site into a place of lasting peace, a small sign of thanks given to a man who had sacrificed everything to restore a single tortured human soul." But for the most part, Fowler is content not to moralize or nudge, letting the tales speak for themselves.

While many of these stories involve horrid fates for their protagonists— "The Green Man" finds an overprotective husband meeting a cruel demise—none of the tales are gratuitously violent. And Fowler is quite capable of writing a wistful, Bradburyian ode such as "One Night Out," about a son and father reunion, or an *Arabian Nights*-style fable such as "The Scorpion Jacket." In short, he shows range, ambition, and skill, as well as a fevered imagination. What more can you demand of any writer?

The Earth-Rann Express

By the time you read these words, the publicity about the death of Julius Schwartz will have long since died down, and all the eulogies faded. Yet if you still wish to honor the man who contributed so much to science fiction and comics —as well you should—you could do no better than to pick up *The Adam Strange Archives: Volume One* (DC Comics, hardcover, $49.95, 220 pages, ISBN 1-4012-0148-2). A project particularly close to Schwartz's heart, the Adam Strange tales exemplify how he brought literate—albeit simplified—SF to a whole generation and segment of the popular that might not otherwise have encountered it, thus birthing a whole new cadre of fans.

Adam Strange debuted in *Showcase* #17, in 1958, as a one-shot trial balloon. Reader reaction proved positive, and soon Adam was headlining *Mystery in Space*. His story went thusly: an archaeologist, Adam accidentally stepped one day into the path of the intermittent zeta beam, a teleport ray that brought him to the planet Rann. There, he fell in love with the beautiful daughter of a scientist (are there any other kind of progeny among researchers?), and aided the planet against alien invaders. When the zeta energy stored in his body wore off, he was instantly back on Earth, forced to await the next zeta transit to return to Rann.

The scripting on each story in this volume was done by Gardner Fox. Mike Sekowsky did the pencils for the first six stories, while Carmine Infantino took over that job thereafter. Schwartz, of course, handled editorial chores, while Gil Kane did covers. It was a brilliant team of absolute pros who coordinated everything to perfection. Fox, relegated to hackdom in the SF field, became a genius in comics. His stories were always clear and crisp, with just enough complications, and included snippets of factual material (which Schwartz could handily footnote) that young readers found enlightening. I speak from experience, having grown up on the output of Fox, Schwartz, et al. How do you think I learned all my astronomy before age ten?

Sekowsky's art was appealing and engaging in his own idiosyncratic style. His aliens were truly weird, for instance. But it was with

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Infantino's arrival that the stories really took off. Infantino's cityscapes and interiors were High Modernism with a futuristic edge, and his spacecraft and aircraft were the Chrysler Imperials of their day. And if you consider, as just one example, the highly abstract final panel on page 105, you'll see that his sense of composition was impeccable.

Gil Kane's gorgeous covers were thought up by Schwartz first, prior to any scripting, thus proving how seminal Schwartz's knowledge of SF was in the plotting of each issue. Tentacled living planets, a giant space guillotine, robots carrying their human operators in their glass-dome heads—the litany of fiendishly alluring images goes on and on. Echoes of the SF films of the 1950s abound as well, with a Godzilla-style creature in "The Beast from the Runaway World" and a colossal man in "Mystery of the Giant Footprints."

Each issue of the series found Strange arriving just in the nick of time to avert a calamity. But the manner of his departure from Earth and his place of arrival on Rann were immensely varied. And in fact, Fox even made fun of his own convention, once or twice having Adam arrive on Rann expecting instant trouble, only to have Alanna respond that he was too jittery, and that everything was fine. Of course, this peace never persisted for long.

Like ERB's John Carter, Adam Strange could often be found staring into the night sky, dreaming of his other life among the stars. It's a potent archetype. But an even stronger parallel exists with Winsor McKay's hero, Little Nemo, who also would fade out of his dreamworld, often just when he was about to reach his own princess. Intentionally or not, Schwartz created in Adam Strange a hero who still today embodies deep longings we all feel, for a life elsewhere filled with action and romance.

As usual with DC's Archive editions, this book features superb reproduction on high-quality stock, making it a keeper for the decades ahead. And it's a lot cheaper than a run of the original comics!

Small Press Titles

Newcomer Darren Speegle boasts a sensibility and style and fiendish ingenuity akin to Ligotti's or Poe's, and he uses these skills to create an impressive debut volume of stories with *Gothic Wine* (Aardwolf Press, trade paper, $14.95, 218 pages, ISBN 0-9706225-3-8). Over half these stories are appearing here for the first time anywhere, making this volume a necessary revelation even to those familiar with Speegle's small-press work. Often set in an eerie, haunted Europe and populated by anomie-ridden protagonists, these tales involve Kafkaesque events whose deeper implications will haunt you long after you finish each narrative. Consider "End of the Line," in which Brian Culligan boards a train to the nowhere city of Esch, Germany, and finds a town haunted by an ancient tragedy that is strangely comforting to him, as well as disturbing. That's the general reaction savvy readers will have to Speegle's fiction as a whole.

Jay Lake is on a roll these days, with two collections recently published. We'll look at the smaller but still impressive one now. *Green Grow the Rushes-Oh* (Fairwood

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Press, chapbook, $6.99, 58 pages, ISBN 0-9746573-0-1) constitutes a series of twelve linked vignettes inspired by the old ballad that contributes the title of this book. Beginning in ancient England with the vegetal god the Green Man, the stories move in a divertingly unpredictable fashion across time and space, visiting futuristic realms as well. Lake writes with authority and sensitivity and a mordant humor— "nails come cheap with God on your side" is his commentary on a crucifixion. As a map of "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower," to use Dylan Thomas's phrase, these stories rival the legend of Swamp Thing.

So long as we're on the topic of comics, perhaps readers will recall the saga of Jonah Hex, a scarred desperado of the Old West. Tim Lebbon's new novella, *Dead Man's Hand* (Necessary Evil Press, trade paper, $12.95, 54 pages, ISBN unavailable) recalls that great series. Into the town of Deadwood rides a one-eyed, wounded man named Gabriel who is stalking his eternal nemesis, Temple. Enlisting the help of a local man named Doug—our narrator—Gabriel soon tracks Temple down to a funeral parlor—where his victim is already ostensibly dead. But only then do the real pyrotechnics begin. Lebbon captures Doug's voice nicely, and delivers a rousing adventure along the Weird West lines of Lucius Shepard's "Bound for Glory."

I always welcome the chance to hail the birth of any new magazine, but in the case of *H.P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror* (Wildside Press, saddle-stapled, $5.99, 82 pages, ISSN unavailable) I feel especially obligated to bring it to your attention. After all, living as I do within hailing distance of HPL's old haunts, I must regard this publication as an honor to the 'hood. Under the editorship of noted fantasist Marvin Kaye (who provides a stimulating editorial regarding his background, tastes, and goals), the first issue of this zine covers a wide gamut of spectral fiction, from the quintessentially Lovecraftian "Envy, the Gardens of Ynath, and the Sin of Cain" by Darrell Schweitzer to the timeless parable of "Xoanon" by Tanith Lee. If future issues continue to feature such a wide and capable range of material, I won't have to worry about finding churned soil at HPL's gravesite.

With its revolving co-op of editors, its determined maintenance of a regular publication schedule, and its policy of searching out new writers as well as established ones, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* (saddle-stapled, AUS$7.95, 128 pages, ISSN 1446-781X) has leaped to the forefront of Australian SF zines. Issue #12 offers fine stories by Mark Tiedemann and Stephen Dedman (oldtimers) as well as by David Kay and Matthew Bey (first sales both). I particularly enjoyed Helen Patrice's "Galatea's," which focuses on the first night of work experienced by a hapless concierge at a brothel that caters to aliens as well as humans. A very tart tale (pun fully intentional). Additionally, *ASIM* continues with its outstanding interviews, reviews, poetry, and other ancillary material.

D.F. Lewis's *Nemonymous* (perfect bound, $10.00, 96 pages, ISSN unavailable) is a zine of a different stripe, utterly unique. Resolutely experimental, from its manner of presentation (no author bylines) to its subject matter (slipstream, postmodern, surreal), this compact little

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book offers immense pleasures, as the reader drifts in an egalitarian sea of pure literature. Although most of the stories in *Nemonymous* #4 are somewhat despairing, a fair number exhibit a mordant humor akin to Kafka's. I'm thinking of, say, "The Rorschach-interpreter," in which the strange professional of the title has a difficult time with an inkblot tattooed directly onto human skin. As far as the guessing game of who wrote what, I find that I'm not doing too well, as all the revealed names to match the stories from issue # 3 are totally out of sync with my suppositions. But then, that's part of the game's lessons.

Issue # 6 of *Electric Velocipede* (saddle-stapled, $4.00, 44 pages, ISSN unavailable), under the capable hands of editor John Klima, seems to me to be the strongest one yet. Featuring over a dozen stories and poems by such well-known names as Liz Williams, Stepan Chapman, and William Shunn, the magazine offers a variety of material, ranging from absurdist fables like Jay Lake's "The Git, the Dog, the Fish and the Gray" to urban fantasy like "Bob's Witch," by Jodee Rubins. Handsomely designed, this zine is a fine example of the valuable niche in fostering short-story talent that the small presses continue to fill.

Publisher Addresses

Aardwolf Press, POB 14792, Durham, NC 27709. Andromeda Spaceways, POB 495, Chinchilla QLD 4413, Australia. Electric Velocipede, POB 663, Franklin Park, NJ 08823. Fairwood Press, 5203 Quincy Avenue SF, Auburn, WA 98092. Necessary Evil Press, 2722 South Hill Road, #31, Gladstone, MI 49837. Nemonymous, www.nemonymous.com. Wildside Press, POB 301, Holicong, PA 18928. ❍

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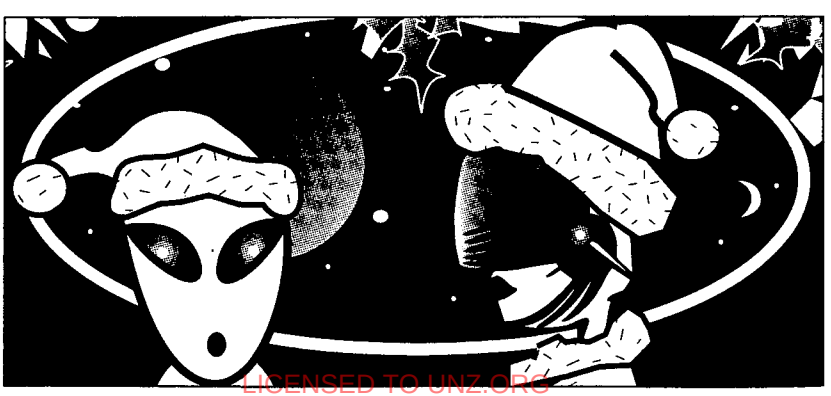

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NINETEENTH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD

It hardly seems possible that we could be up to the January issue already, but that's what the calendar says—and that means that once again it's time for our Readers' Award poll, which is now in its (can this possibly be true? Seems like only yesterday that we started it!) nineteenth year.

Please vote. Most of you know the drill by now. For those of you who are new to this, we should explain a few things.

We consider this to be our yearly chance to hear from *you*, the readers of the magazine. That's the whole point behind this particular award. What were *your* favorite stories from *Asimov's Science Fiction* last year? This is your chance to let us know what novella, novelette, short story, poem, and cover artist, you liked best in the year 2004. Just take a moment to look over the Index of the stories published in last year's issues of *Asimov's* (pp.137-139) to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category.

Some cautions: Only material from 2004-dated issues of *Asimov's* is eligible (no other years, no other magazines, even our sister magazine *Analog*). **Each reader gets *one* vote, and *only* one vote.** If you use a photocopy of the ballot, please be sure to include your name and address; your ballot won't be counted otherwise.

Works must also be categorized on the ballot as they appear in the **Index.** No matter what category *you* think a particular story ought to appear in, we consider the Index to be the ultimate authority in this regard, so be sure to check your ballots against the Index if there is any question about which category is the appropriate one for any particular story. In the past, voters have been careless about this, and have listed stories under the wrong categories, and, as a result, ended up wasting their votes. All ballots must be postmarked no later than **February 1, 2005,** and should be addressed to: **Readers' Award, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, 11th Flr., New York, NY. 10016.** You can also vote online at **asimovs@dellmagazines.com**, but you must give us your whole U.S. mailing address. We will also post online ballots at our website, so please check us out at **www.asimovs.com.**

Remember, *you*—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. *You* are in charge here, and what *you* say goes. In the past, some categories have been hotly contended, with victory or defeat riding on only one or two votes, so *every* vote counts. Don't let it be *your* vote for *your* favorite stories that goes uncounted! So don't put it off—vote today!

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BEST NOVELLA:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST NOVELETTE:

1. _____
2. _____
3 _____

BEST SHORT STORY:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST POEM:

1. _____
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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

With the holiday lull coming up, here's a look at the next six months' events. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

NOVEMBER 2004

19–21—**VulKon.** For info, write: **Box 297122, Pembroke Pines FL 33029.** Or phone: **(954) 441-8735** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) Vulcon.com. (Email) bartowl1701@aol.com.** Con will be held in: Orlando (if city omitted, same as in the address) at the Hilton North. Guests will include: L. Nimoy. Stargate SG-1 guest TBA. Commercial Star Trek event.

26–28—**LosCon. (818) 760-9234. loscon.org.** LAX Marriot, Los Angeles CA. Tim Powers, the Daughertys. Old LA con.

26–28—**Chicago Tardis. (630) 790-0905. chicagotardis.com.** Sheraton NW, Arlington Heights IL. Dr. Who.

26–28—**ChamBanaCon. turkey@chambanacon.org.** Hilton, Springfield IL. Tom & Tara Barber. "Old fashioned relaxacon."

26–28—**Darkover Grand Council Meeting. jaelle@radix.net.** Holiday Inn, Timonium (Baltimore) MD. T. Pierce, Kurtz.

26–28—**BeNeLuxCon. ncsf.nl. webmaster.ncsf.nl.** Alfa-Inn, Blankenberg, Belgium. Annual Low-Countries con.

DECEMBER 2004

2–5—**SMOFCon, c/o Macintosh, 7113 Wayne Dr. Annandale VA 22003. wsfa.org.** Washington DC. Con runners' con.

10–12—**PhilCon, Box 3, Oreland PA 19075. philcon.org.** Marriot, Philadelphia PA. B. Aldiss, K.J. Anderson, Purdom.

JANUARY 2005

14–16—**Arisia, Bldg. 600, #322, 1 Kendall Sq., Cambridge MA 02139. arisia.org.** Park Plaza, Boston MA. B. Hambly.

14–16—**RustyCon, Box 27075, Seattle WA 98165. rustycon.com.** SeaTac Radisson. R. Steve Adams, IKV T'mar.

21–23—**ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107. stilyagi.org.** Troy MI. E. Bull, W. Shetterly, D. Grime, C. Ready.

28–30—**VeriCon, HRSFA, 4 Univ. Hall, Cambridge MA 02138. vericon.org.** Harvard U. SF, fantasy, gaming, anime.

FEBRUARY 2005

4–6—**UK Filk Con, c/o Weingart, 263 Sprucewood Dr., Levittown NY 11756. contabile.org.uk.** In England. Music.

11–13—**FarPoint, 11708 Troy Ct., Waldorf MD 20601. farpoint.com.** Marriot, Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD. Star Trek.

18–20—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 776 3243 (fax). boskone.org.** Sheraton, Boston MA. Card.

MARCH 2005

18–20—**LunaCon, 847A 2nd Ave. #234, New York, NY 10017. lunacon.org.** Sheraton, Meadowlands NJ (near NY City.)

18–20—**TechniCon, Box 256, Blacksburg, VA 24063. technicon.org.** No more information available at press time.

25–28—**UK Nat'l. Con, c/o J. Dowd, 4 Burnside Ave., Sheffield S8 9FR, UK. paragon2.org.uk.** Hinckley, England.

25–28—**NZ Nat'l. Con, Box 13-574, Johnsonville, Wellington, New Zealand. icon.sf.org.ns.** O.S. Card, B. Geradts.

AUGUST 2005

4–8—**Interaction, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk.** Glasgow Scotland. $170/£95.

SEPTEMBER 2005

1–5—**CascadiaCon, Box 1066, Seattle, WA 98111. www.seattle2005.org.** The NASFiC, while WorldCon's in Glasgow. $85.

AUGUST 2006

23–27—**LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. info@laconiv.com.** Anaheim Ca. Connie Willis. WorldCon. $125+

AUGUST 2007

30–Sep. 3—**Nippon 2007, Box 314 Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. nippon2007.org.** Yokohama Japan. WorldCon. $160+

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NEXT ISSUE

JANUARY ISSUE

Jim Grimsley, author of "Into Greenwood," one of 2001's most popular and talked-about stories, returns with our lead story for February, giving us a harrowing view of "The 120 Hours of Sodom."

ALSO IN JANUARY

William Sanders, author of such stories as "The Undiscovered" and "When This World Is All on Fire," sweeps us aloft and on the wing in a war-torn future, to see if we can manage to score some "Angel Kills"; Sturgeon Award-winner and Hugo finalist **Kage Baker** visits a small fishing village at the edge of an angry sea to learn the true story of "The Two Old Women"; **Leslie What** sends us some postcards from "Dead Men on Vacation"; **R. Garcia y Robertson**, one of the modern masters of SF adventure writing, takes us to a planet locked in a bitter civil war to learn the deadly consequences of "Oxygen Rising"; **Robert A. Metzger** makes a dazzling *Asimov's* debut with an investigation of an ordinary street in an ordinary small town where, as you'll see, absolutely *nothing* is anything even remotely like it seems; and new writer **Edd Vick** relates the thrilling adventures through time and space of the "Parachute Kid."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column discusses "Grand Masters, the Sequel"; **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" column talks about being "Afraid of the Darknet"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our February 2005 issue on sale at your newsstand on December 28, 2004. Or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic stuff we have coming up for you this year (you can also subscribe to *Asimov's* online, in varying formats, including downloadable forms for your PDA, by going to our website, *www.asimovs.com*).

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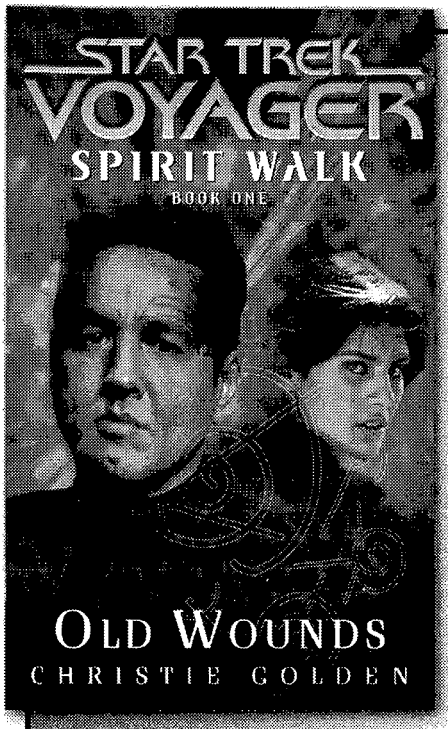

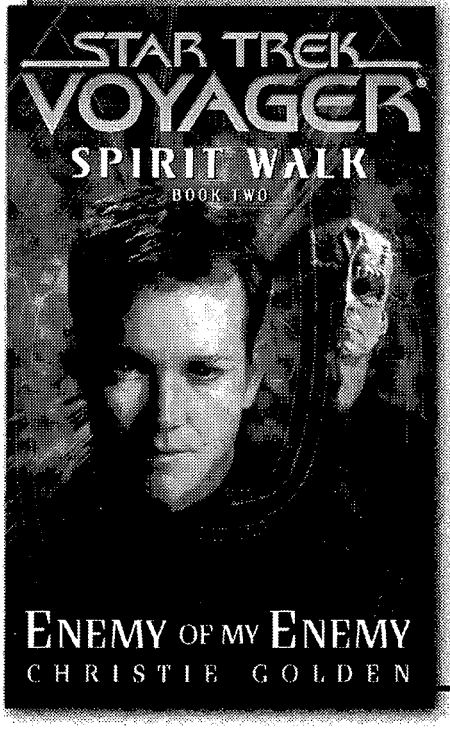

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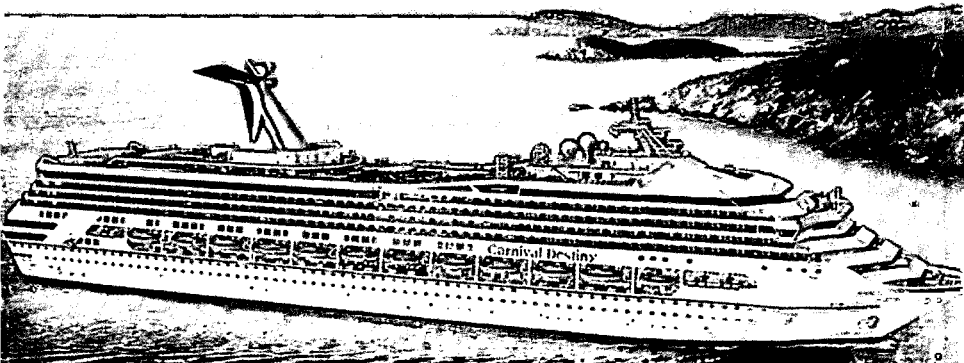

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